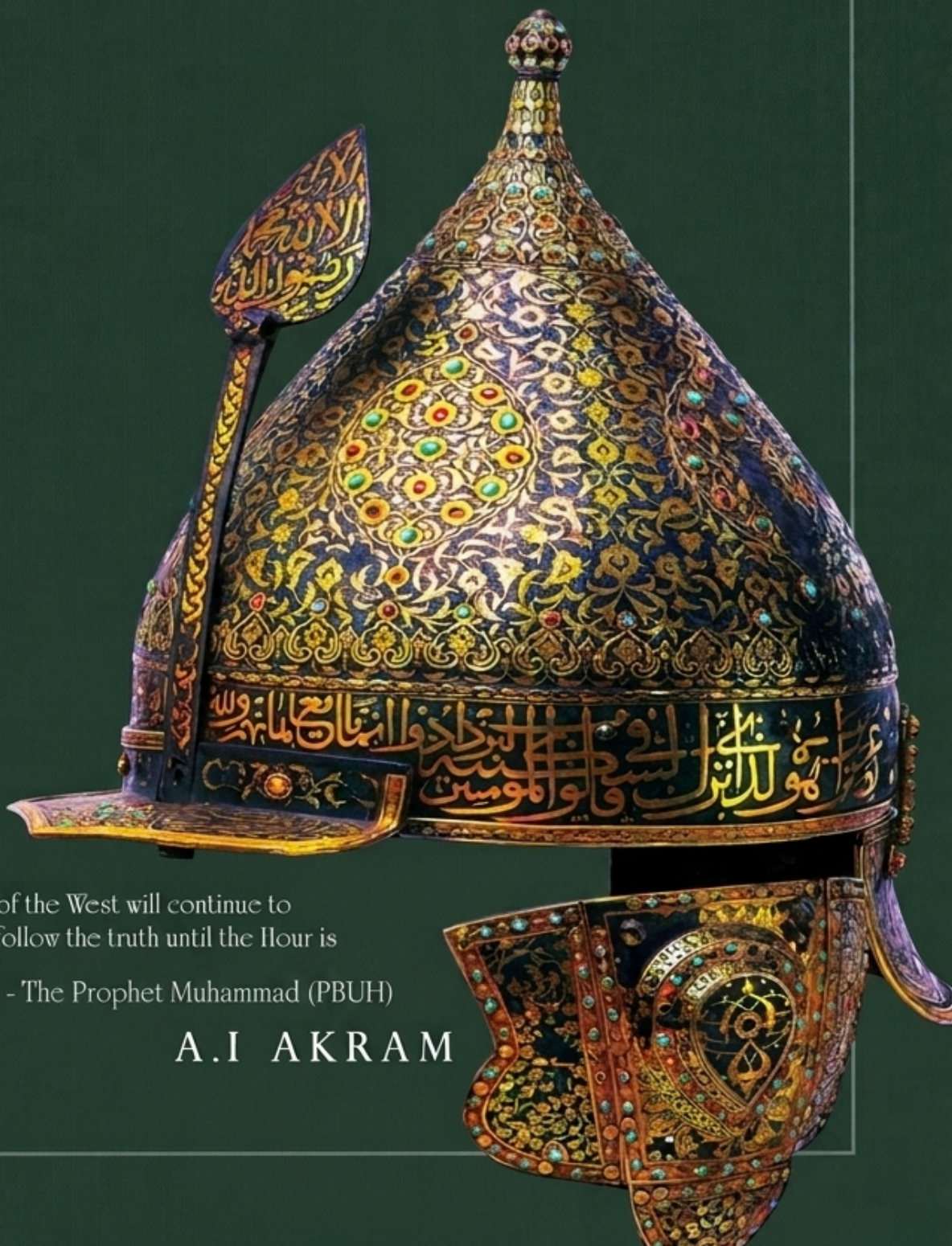
ISLAMIC MILITARY HISTORY SERIES

THE MUSLIM CONQUEST OF EGYPT & NORTH AFRICA



" The people of the West will continue to triumphantly follow the truth until the Hour is established."

- The Prophet Muhammad (PBUH)

A.I AKRAM

THE MUSLIM CONQUEST OF EGYPT AND NORTH AFRICA

by
Lieutenant General A. I. AKRAM

Ferozsons Ltd.
LAHORE - PAKISTAN

By the same Author

THE SWORD OF ALLAH

THE MUSLIM CONQUEST OF PERSIA

CONTENTS

		Page
Preface	..	*xiii*
A Note on Arabic Names	..	*xxiii*

PART I THE CONQUEST OF EGYPT

1.	The Golden Ball	..	1
2.	The Reluctant Caliph	..	9
3.	The March to Memphis	..	16
4.	The Struggle for Babylon	..	25
5.	The Fall of Babylon	..	40
6.	The Copts of Egypt	..	56
7.	The Advance to Alexandria	..	66
8.	The Conquest of Alexandria	..	77
9.	The New Capital of Egypt	..	93
10.	The Caliph and the Nile	..	101
11.	The Conquest of Barqa and Tripoli	..	110
12.	Amr and the Caliphs	..	116
13.	The Second Conquest of Alexandria	..	126

PART II THE CONQUEST OF NORTH AFRICA

14.	Objective Africa	..	143
15.	The Battle of Subetula	..	152
16.	War in the Mediterranean	..	174
17.	The Last Days of Amr bin Al Aas	..	184
18.	Back to Africa	..	195
19.	Uqba bin Nafe	..	203
20.	Uqba's Invasion of the Maghreb	..	220

		Page
21.	The End of Uqba	236
22.	The Fourth Invasion of Africa	249
23.	The Fifth Invasion of Africa	259
24.	The High Priestess	268
25.	Musa bin Nuseir	279
26.	A Pause for Reflection	287
	Appendix A : Bibliography	299
	Appendix B : The Hijri and Christian Years	300
	Appendix C : Index of Places	303
	Appendix D : Index of Persons	307

MAPS

	Egypt and North Africa	Endpaper
1.	The Nile Delta	Opposite Page 18
2.	The Region of Babylon	–do– 25
3.	The Battle of Babylon I	–do– 30
4.	The Battle of Babylon II	–do– 38
5.	The Advance to Alexandria	–do– 75
6.	Alexandria	–do– 83
7.	The Battle of Naqyus I	–do– 132
8.	The Battle of Naqyus II	–do– 136
9.	The Region of Carthage I	–do– 154
10.	The Battle of Subetula I	–do– 159
11.	The Battle of Subetula II	–do– 167
12.	The Region of Carthage II	–do– 212
13.	The Maghreb	–do– 223
14.	The War of the High Priestess	–do– 272
15.	The Western Mediterranean	–do– 287

PREFACE

Praise be to Allah, the Lord of the Worlds. With various interruptions caused by the exigencies of miitary service, my work of research in Muslim Military History has proceeded at a satisfactory pace. I can look back with some pride and much thankfulness to the success of my two earlier works: *The Sword of Allah* and *The Muslim Conquest of Persia.* The first of these has been translated into Arabic and Urdu, while the Indonesian Ministry of Religious Affairs at Djakarta is engaged upon an Indonesian edition. The second is being translated into Urdu at Karachi.

The acceptance of my books in a large part of the Muslim world has been a great encouragement. And since this has been a labour of love rather than a worldly venture, my resolve has been further strengthened by the difficulties of the journey.

I was in Ankara as Pakistan's Permanent Military Deputy to the Central Treaty Organisation (CENTO) when I completed work on *The Muslim Conquest of Persia.* Having despatched the manuscript to press, I began work on the present volume, in the early part of 1975. The campaigns in this volume are extensive in both time and space, so I decided to break it down into parts, selecting as the first part the campaign in Egypt. My draft of this campaign was complete by the middle of the year, but the pressure of work delayed till the following year my visit to Egypt to carry out a battlefield tour for this part of the book.

It was in the latter half of March 1976 that I was able to go. I flew to Cairo on March 18 and stayed with the Pakistan Military

Attache, Colonel S. R. H. Fatmi, who was an old student of mine from the Staff College. He and his gracious wife, Sadiqa, looked after me very well and made my stay extremely pleasant in their lovely 12th floor flat overlooking the Nile. Having settled down as a house guest, I got down to meeting scholars and seeing places.

I met Dr. Moursei Saadedin, Head of the Information Department, who was very kind and cooperative and arranged for me some help which I needed in Alexandria. I called on Dr. Soad Maher, Dean of the Faculty of Archaeology at the Cairo University, and was surprised to find that the doctor was a lady—a tall, handsome woman whom I greatly enjoyed talking with. And I visited, at his house, Dr. Ahmed Shalaby, Head of the Department of Islamic History and Civilisation at the Dar-ul-Ulum, Cairo University. I was struck by the vast intellectual horizon of this scholar, his clear, historical grasp; and yet such a modest, gentle, unspoiled man.

The only place which I had to see in Cairo was the fort and area of Babylon, which was the first great objective captured by Amr bin Al Aas in his invasion of Egypt. I spent two days examining Babylon, taking measurements, drawing sketches. One massive bastion of the fort is still there, constructed of brick and stone with eight foot thick walls and a height of 60 feet, in three storeys, two of which now appear to be below ground level because either the bastion has sunk or the surrounding ground has risen. I saw several other parts of the wall of the fort and a number of towers. I examined a 50-foot high ridge lying to the east of Babylon behind which Kharija's cavalry had concealed itself on the fateful day when the Romans were nearly wiped out by Amr bin Al Aas. And I walked round what I believe had been the entire town of Babylon, an area now clustered with Coptic chapels and graveyards with people living in and around them. This was the area, and a bit to the east, where Fustat was built—the first Muslim cantonment in Egypt.

I saw the mosque of Amr bin Al Aas, standing about 500 yards north of the fort of Babylon, the construction of which has been described in Chapter 9. It has been built and rebuilt umpteen times and was in fact being rebuilt again when I visited it. A large

mosque, about 150 yards deep and 200 yards wide, it would look fine when the present construction is completed, but with the disorder in which I found it the place did not have the same emotional impact upon me as the Mosque of Khalid bin Al Waleed in Emessa, which I had visited in 1968 when preparing my first book: *The Sword of Allah.*

I drove to Alexandria for a day to locate the places which featured in the siege. I met officials in the Information Department and held discussions with several distinguished professors at the University of Alexandria. All were keen to help but none could, for no trace or knowledge of these places remains. When Amr swore, at the second siege of Alexandria, that upon victory he would demolish its walls so that it would be "like the house of an adultress, accessible from all sides," he meant what he said. He kept his word, and not a sign, not a brick remains of the ramparts, or the Church of Gold or the Mosque of Mercy. What remains is described in Chapter 8. In fact, so far as Alexandria is concerned, I was up against a blank wall; it is just not possible to place the topographical details of the Battle of Alexandria. For this reason, my account of the siege in Chapter 8 does not relate actions specifically to the ground and the map I have prepared (No 6) is not a very detailed one.

While in Cairo I did the usual tourist sights: the pyramids, the bazars, the museums. I attended a sound-and-light show at the Sphinx, was most impressed by what I heard and saw, and made a mental note of an old Arab saying which they quoted regarding the durability of the pyramids: "The world fears time; but time fears the pyramids." One of the best of my tourist visits was to the national museum of Cairo, dealing with the Pharaonic period, which is a magnificent storehouse of ancient history. A local guide showed me the entire works, including the hall of mummies. At one place in this hall a slab was unoccupied and was obviously meant for occupation, but I was informed that this was the place of the great pharaoh, Ramses II, whose mummy had been sent to Paris for display at some big exhibition. What I found very amusing was the casual, matter-of-fact way in which the guide said, "Ramses II has gone to Paris." as if the old fellow was out on his annual binge.

A week after my arrival in Egypt, I flew back to Ankara. I had seen what I set out to see and what it was possible to see, thanks to the arrangements made by my faithful friend, Colonel Fatmi.

Upon return to Ankara I devoted my leisure time to revising, polishing and finalising the first part of the book – a task which took me several weeks. While studying and writing this campaign I was conscious of the absence of great and bloody battles of the kind which I had found and described in my earlier books. Here the largest military actions of which details are available were the two major sieges – of Babylon and Alexandria – and neither of these could approach, in brilliance of manoeuvre, in scope and in the scale of blood, the fierce and gory battles of Khalid bin Al Waleed or the vast and terrible clashes between Islam and Persia. In fact Egypt was conquered by a Muslim army of only about 12,000 men. But I was lucky to be dealing with a man like Amr bin Al Aas – the greatest general of the time after Khalid; and if his religious stature did not match his military prowess, that only made his personality more colourful and his character more interesting.

For this campaign, as for the ones that comprise the second part of this volume, I relied mainly on early Muslim historians who were, in their time, unequalled in literary stature, historical perspective and objectivity. I did, however, consult later writers also, mainly Muslim ones. I had found that as the holy war advanced away from Arabia the early Muslim chroniclers said less about it than about warfare in the more contiguous regions. Moreover, some parts of their historical works are no longer extant in the original but preserved in the writings of later historians like Zahabi and Ibn-ul-Aseer and Ibn Khaldun. Hence the necessity of consulting later writers.

I was anxious to find some non-Muslim contemporary material in order to see the other side of the picture. Theophanes and Nicephorus, Byzantine historians of the 8th and 9th Centuries, were not available in the English language and are not, I believe, very dependable either. But I was glad to discover the existence of a chronicle by a John, who was Coptic Bishop of Nikiu and rector of bishops in Upper Egypt at the end of the 7th Century. This man had also been appointed Administrator-General of the

Monasteries but was later removed from this post. He wrote a chronicle.

On a visit to London in July 1975, I was able to lay my hands on a copy of the English version of this chronicle: "The Chronicle of John, Bishop of Nikiu," translated by R. H. Charles (William and Norgate, Oxford, 1916). I read it eagerly. I was disappointed. The historical value of the chronicle is nil, in spite of the efforts of some writers to build him up into a literary giant and an acceptable historical source. The chronicle is interesting enough to read, in fact quite amusing, at times like a collection of Old Testament tales, confused, confusing, quaint, the work of a mind never very sharp and perhaps turning to senility. Admittedly, the serious student seeking solid historical substance may get this impression because he inevitably compares John of Nikiu with Muslim historians of the time who stood head and shoulders above men like John, but the best that can be said about the good bishop is that he probably meant well. However, I am glad that I read his book.

In late 1976 I took up the second part of the book: The Conquest of North Africa. When the early Muslim chroniclers spoke of Africa, or Afriqia, they did not mean the continent of Africa as we know it today. They meant roughly the coastal belt of the area now occupied by Libya and Tunisia and a bit of Algeria. The northern zone of the present continent of Africa, between the Red Sea and the Atlantic, along the Mediterranean coast, was regarded as comprising three distinct regions: Egypt, Afriqia and the Maghreb, the last-named meaning "West". Afriqia and the Maghreb together constituted what we now call North Africa.

It was in this African theatre that the Muslims, marching westwards in triumph, experienced a change of enemies from the Copts to the Berbers and Goths, with the Romans keeping up with the Muslims in their opposition. The reader will read more about the Copts and the Berbers and the Goths in the book, but it will be useful to explain here the use of the word "Roman" when speaking of the empire based on Constantinople, and of its citizens.

I have called it the Roman Empire and its soldiers and citizens Romans. Nowadays historians make a distinction between

Roman and Byzantine and use the latter word for the Constantinople-based empire. The fact is that when the Roman Emperor Constantine shifted his capital from Rome to Byzantium and inaugurated the new capital as Constantinople in 330 A. D., he regarded his empire as the same empire as before. He even called it Eastern Rome. And for centuries the people called themselves Romans, had the Roman administrative system and structure and followed Roman imperial and political institutions. They were Romans for all purposes except that they did not live in Rome. Even Good Bishop John of Nikiu calls them Romans. Actually it was at the time of this history (7th Century) that the Roman empire, strictly speaking, turned Byzantine, with Heraclius as the first of the Byzantine emperors. But since he also regarded himself as Roman and so did everybody else in the imperial domain, and since the Muslim historians too called them Romans and their empire Rome, I have done likewise. The imperial enemy of the newly-risen Islam was "Rome", and Rome fought the Muslims with "Romans".

I found this part of the work difficult because the material available on it was limited. Although the battles fought in North Africa were contemporaneous with other events in or near the Arabian heartland, upon which volumes have been written by the early chroniclers, there is very little on North Africa; certainly not enough to produce a full, living, blood-red picture. I also found this part confusing when first approached, because Muslim armies kept marching into Africa and then marching out and forgetting all about Africa for years until it was time for them to march in again. It took quite a bit of study before a clear pattern emerged to form a coherent picture – a picture which has been offered to the reader in this part and analysed for him in the last chapter of the book.

But I thoroughly enjoyed the work, because of the new people I had to study; the Berbers. I found them to be a fascinating people warlike, courageous, mercurial, unpredictable; backward but noble and beautiful: No people fought more fiercely against Islam, and no people rose in greater glory after being defeated, converted and absorbed by Islam.

By the end of 1976 my work was done; the last chapter written. All that was needed now to complete the project of this book was a visit to North Africa, but again the exigencies of service intervened and there was a long delay. It was not until late in the summer of 1977 that I was able to get away from Ankara.

I decided to visit Tunisia only, because it was only in Tunisia that a great battle was fought of which details are available. There was a good deal of fierce and bloody fighting also in the region that is now Algeria and Morocco, but we have no details, not even precise locations, and since the purpose of my visits is to study the ground where the battles were fought, that purpose would not be achieved except in Tunisia. It would be nice to visit Algeria and Morocco, meet scholars, see the modern Maghreb, but the likely benefits would not be commensurate with the likely expenditure of time and money.

I flew to Tunis on Monday, September 4, and upon settling down in my hotel sent for Colonel Mohamed Gzara of the Ministry of National Defence. He had been deputed by the Government of Tunisia to organise and supervise my visit. I was very glad to meet this smart young armour officer, and we went over the plan of my visit which was to be put into effect the very next day with a meeting with two Tunisian scholars: Professor Mohamed Fantar of the Department of Punic Archaeology and Professor Chabbouh Brahim of the University of Tunis.

I was impressed by the professional zeal and breadth of knowledge of these still young intellectuals. I had an interesting exchange of ideas with them, from which I was undoubtedly the gainer and in which many points of doubt were cleared up.

On Wednesday morning I drove to Sousa and picking up an army captain as aide and guide went on to see Monasteer. Part of the way the road ran along the Mediterranean coast – a summer paradise dotted with hotels and beaches to which holiday makers flock for sea, sun and sand. Anywhere that I stopped I saw a beautiful sea bordered by a beautiful beach, the beach covered with beautiful sand, the sand covered with beautiful people. At one

such place, in Sousa, I went into a hotel – sand, sea and all – and took up residence for two days.

I drove to the high ground on the coast near the village of Aquda, about 10 miles above Sousa, from which Abdullah bin Zubeir approaching Sousa in the campaign of 45 Hijri (665 A.D) had looked upon the Roman fleet riding at anchor and seen the Roman camp by the beach. The battle in which Abdullah trounced the Roman legions of Nicephorus and drove them with heavy slaughter to their ships was fought where modern Sousa now stands and the site of my hotel was probably part of the battlefield.

I visited the city of Qeirowan, built by Uqba bin Nafe thirteen centuries ago. I stopped and prayed at the grave of a Companion by the name of Abu Zum'a al Balawi, who had been the Holy Prophet's barber, who had taken part in the campaigns of Egypt and North Africa and now lies buried at Qeirowan. And I saw the Mosque of Uqba bin Nafe.

It is a very large mosque, certainly one of the largest in North Africa, comprising a large covered portion and an even larger open one. The present structure is believed to have been built in the 9th Century. It does not have the polished refinement and the elaborate decoration of the great Oriental mosques, but it has a simple elegance more in keeping with the spirit of the desert and the character of the devout holy warrior who built the original.

The most important single item on my programme in Tunisia was the visit to Subetula, where the Muslims fought their first great battle in North Africa, where King Gregory was killed and his daughter, the beauteous and talented Sabiyya, was taken as a prize of war by Abdullah bin Zubeir. (The townspeople insist that she was named Sufetula, rather like their town). Memories of this historic battle are kept slive at Subetula by an annual celebration at which there is much music and song and sacrificing of sheep. Special prayers are offered to commemmorate the Muslim victory and the old regale the young with tales of the battle. It is in this manner that the account of the battle has been passed down from father to son over the centuries, and while it varies in some minor

detail from the written accounts of the historians, it is nevertheless accurate and makes military sense.

My guide was a local official named Ammar Mohamedi – a fine dignified, grey-haired Berber who, had he lived in times gone by, would have been the big chief of a mighty clan. We went to the battlefield, not far from the town and climbed on to a small hill topped by an olive tree, where apparently many of the Muslim wounded had been treated for their wounds. Standing on this hill, Ammar gave me an account of the Battle of Subetula.

This hill, which I have named Olive Hill in my narrative of the battle in Chapter 15, was an excellent viewpoint and I spent a long time examining the terrain, going over the battle, relating various actions to the ground and adapting the account as I knew it to the terrain as I now saw it. The battlefield looked a bit different to what I had earlier imagined but it all fitted in beautifully. I drew a map, thanked my guide and drove back to Sousa.

The following day I returned to Tunis, where I was to spend two relatively quiet days, working on my notes and doing a little sight-seeing. Then, on Sunday, September 11, my visit ended, my purpose accomplished, I got into a plane of Tunisian Airlines to fly to Rome, whence I would take another flight to Turkey.

My mind was full of memories of an enjoyable stay in a pleasant land of kind, friendly people – a land in which one is always seeing blue: the blue sea, the blue sky, blue-painted doors and windows. I was conscious of the help that I had received from the Tunisian Ministry of National Defence, in particular from Colonel Mohamed Gzara, without which my visit could not have been as successful as it was. And all this had come to be because of the helpful and cooperative attitude of the Tunisian Ambassador in Turkey, Salah Ladgham, and his First Secretary, Mohieddine Mouakhar, who had handled my request for help in carrying out this tour of Tunisia.

As the plane rose from Carthage Airport and I looked at the receding coastline of the Maghreb, I thought of the words of Prophet Muhammad, on whom be peace:

There will always be a group of my followers in the Maghreb, fighting in the way of the Truth, till the coming of the Hour.

This manuscript goes to press with a prayer of thanks to Almighty God who has made the work possible, with an expression of gratitude to my wife, Inge, for checking the draft and helping in many other ways, and with my deep appreciation of the time and labour devoted to it by my faithful secretary, Subedar Abdul Sattar Shad, who has typed the manuscript.

December, 1977 **A. I. AKRAM**
Ankara, Turkey.

A NOTE ON ARABIC NAMES

A brief explanation of the system of Arabic names would help the reader in understanding the filial relationship indicated by a named. It would also help him to understand why the same person is known by so many different names.

An Arab (and this custom is still prevalent in some Arab societies) was known by three names. One was his own personal name, say Talha. Another was the name of his father, say Abdullah, and in this case he was known as Ibn or Bin Abdullah, i.e. Son of Abdullah. The third was the name of his son, say Zeid. Thus he could be called Talha or Ibn Abdullah or Abu Zeid, the last being the most respectful way of addressing a person. In certain grammatical forms Abu is expressed as Abi, and both have been used in this book.

Since the father too would be known by the name of a son, the son would at times have a name like Talha bin Abi Usman i.e. Talha, Son of the Father of Usman (Usman being a brother of Talha). A man could even be known as Talha bin Abi Talha which, translated literally, means: Talha, Son of the Father of Talha. This may sound odd in English, but in Arabic it is normal, and in fact quite charming.

The same rule applies to women. A girl by the name of Asma would be known as Asma bint Abdullah, i.e. Daughter of Abdullah. And on becoming a mother she would be known as the mother of her son or daughter, e.g. Umm Zeid, i.e. Mother of Zeid.

In the pronunciation of Arabic names fine differences, as between S and Th or Z and Dh, have been ignored in this book, although to Arabs these differences are very real and the sound quite distinct. To simplify pronunciation, sounds commonly used in Pakistan – S and Z – have been used throughout the book.

PART 1
THE CONQUEST OF EGYPT

1

The Golden Ball

The stocky young Arab sat on a slope of the hill, his shrewd, restless eyes flickering over the landscape which stretched before him, and resting every now and then upon the flock of camels which grazed contentedly at the foot of the hill. A short distance away stood the holy city of Jerusalem.

Rather short in stature (perhaps one could generously describe him as of medium height) the Arab was broad-shouldered and strongly built. A large forehead rose above big, black eyes and parted eyebrows. He had a wide mouth and a full beard, and was noticeable for his big, strong hands and his large feet. Across his back was slung a powerful bow while a quiver full of arrows hung from his shoulder. Somewhere in his mid-twenties, he was known to his friends as a man who could not be deceived.

The Arab had travelled from Mecca with a trade caravan to buy and sell in Palestine, and hoped to do good business. The members of the caravan were all his friends and took turns to look after the camels as they grazed, and this day it was the turn of this young Arab. It was the middle of a hot summer's day.

As the Arab watched the grazing flock, an old Egyptian appeared from the side upon the slope of the hill. Panting and puffing, his throat parched from the dry midday heat, the Egyptian approached the Arab and asked for water to quench his thirst. True to the

traditions of desert hospitality, the Arab offered the Egyptian the waterskin which he carried, and the Egyptian drank his fill. His thirst quenched, he lay down in the shade of a large bush and fell asleep. The Arab watched him without interest.

Suddenly, from a hole in the ground not far from where the Egyptian lay, appeared the head of a snake, to be followed moments later by the entire body. It was an enormous reptile. Slowly it began to slither towards the slumbering Egyptian; and as it moved, the Arab, with a few deft motions, brought his bow into action and fitted an arrow to it. The snake was quite close to the Egyptian when the arrow of the Arab flew through the air. A moment later, its body pierced by the Arab's arrow, the serpent writhed in agony on the hillside. Then it lay still. The movements of the serpent were not loud enough to disturb the heavy slumber of the Egyptian, and the Arab, who was known in his land as one of the finest archers of the time and thought nothing of hitting a moving target, resumed his silent vigil.

The visitor from Egypt belonged to some priestly order, but what his actual rank and appointment were we do not know. He continued to sleep. After a while, however, he woke up, feeling sufficiently rested, but as his eyes fell upon the big snake which lay dead a few paces away from him, its body transfixed by an arrow, he turned in bewilderment towards the Arab. In reply to his question the Arab told him simply that he had killed the snake with his arrow.

The Egyptian rose to his feet. Slowly he came up to the Arab and kissed him on the head. "God has saved my life twice by your hand." he said, "once from thirst and once from this snake. What brings you to this land?"

"I have come with some friends to gain profit from trade," the Arab replied.

"And what do you hope to make as profit in your trade?"

"I hope to make enough to buy a camel. I have two camels and hope to acquire another, so that I shall possess three camels."

The Egyptian pondered this for a while and then, anxious to do something to repay the good deed of the Arab, asked: "Do you know what is the cost of a human life among your people?" By this he meant the sum which one had to pay as blood-money for a man's life.

The Arab answered, "A hundred camels."

This meant little to the polished Egyptian who had dwelt all his life in the city and knew nothing about financial deals in terms of camels. "We are not people of camels," he said. "We are people of dinars." The dinar was the gold piece of the time.

The Arab did a quick calculation and said, "That would be a thousand dinars."

"I am a stranger in this land," the Egyptian went on. "I have come to pray at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre and to walk these hills for a month, in fulfilment of a vow which I had made. That time has now passed and I am about to return. If you will follow me to my country I give you my word before God that I shall give you the cost of two human lives, because God saved my life twice by your hand".

"What is your country?" asked the Arab.

"Egypt; and my city is known as Alexandria".

I do not know your city, and I shall never enter it."

The Egyptian persisted. "If you would only enter it you would know that never before have you entered a city like it."

The Arab still hesitated. The idea was so strange and the journey proposed by the Egyptian so far from his normal travel routes that he did not know what to make of the Egyptian's offer. He made a tentative enquiry: "And you will keep your word? You make a solemn promise?"

"Yes," affirmed the Egyptian. "I swear by God to keep my word and return you safely to your friends."

"How long will we be away?"

"One month," answered the Egyptian. "For ten days you will travel with me; ten days you will spend with us; and you will take ten days to return. I shall be responsible for your safety as we go and will send someone with you who will protect you on your return."

The Arab needed time to think about all this. "Wait till I have consulted my companions," he said.[1]

The Arab went back to his companions and told them what had passed between him and the Egyptian. He then proposed that they wait for him for a month while he visited Egypt, and in return he would give them half of whatever he gained from his journey. To this his companions agreed; and it was also agreed that another Arab from the company would go with him to Egypt.

The Arab, his companion and the Egyptian set off on their ten days journey. When they got to Alexandria the Arab was awe-struck by all that he saw; the magnificent palaces, the splendid buildings, the vast populace which thronged the streets, the immense wealth of the great metropolis. The more he saw the more he marvelled at what he saw.

The Egyptian looked after his guest with superb hospitality. And as it happened, the visit of the Arab coincided with an annual festival held in Alexandria on which the people would gather in the Hippodrome – the spacious stadium of the city. In this festival, among other things, a strange game, almost a rite, would be played by the nobles of the land. When all the noblemen, the princes of the land and the gentry had got together, one of the nobles, acting as what we would now call a batter, would strike a golden ball and send it flying in the air. As the ball came down everyone would endeavour to catch it in his sleeve, for it was believed that the one who caught the golden ball in his sleeve would not die till he had ruled over Egypt.

The Egyptian priest took his Arab guest to the festival. At the appropriate time the nobleman whose duty it was to act as batter

1. Ibn Abdul Hakam: p. 54.

struck the ball and sent it sailing in the air. Everyone watched the golden ball in tense expectation and followed its path as it curved in the air and returned to earth. The ball landed neatly in the sleeve of the Arab!

For a few moments there was a stunned silence among the spectators. All those who had hoped to rule Egypt, in fact all who saw the strange event, were dumbstruck. Then they began to talk excitedly among themselves. "Never has the ball proved false except this time," they said to each other. "Do you see this bedouin ruling over us? This can never be."[1] And they laughed heartily at the seemingly comical situation.

Little did they know, these refined and polished gentlemen of Egypt, as they laughed at the simple Arab, that a quarter of a century later his name would be whispered in fear in their land. This Arab was the future conqueror of Egypt. His name was Amr bin Al Aas.

* * *

Amr bin Al Aas was a Sahmi, in other words he was from the clan of Bani Sahm. According to genealogists, he was Amr, son of Al Aas, son of Wail, son of Hashim, son of Sueid, son of Sahm (after whom the clan was named), son of Huseis, son of Kab, son of Luwa, son of Ghalib, son of Fahr, son of Malik, son of Nazar, son of Kinana. As was the Arab custom of the time, he was also known by the name of his son, his first-born, and thus was called Abu Abdullah, i.e. Father of Abdullah. He had the distinction amongst the Arabs of having married the earliest, at the age of 12 years, and of fathering a son, Abdullah, at 13.[2]

At the time when Amr was visiting Alexandria, the Prophet Muhammad, on whom be the blessings of Allah, was being driven from pillar to post by the unbelieving Qureish at Mecca. This was in the years preceding the migration to Madina. Amr was himself one of the most unyielding opponents of Islam and strained every nerve to destroy the mission of Muhammad as the last of God's apostles. He even wished to kill Muhammad. He once went to Abyssinia in pursuit of a group of Muslims who had been permitted

1. *Ibid:* p 55.
2. Ibn Quteiba: p 286.

by the Holy Prophet to migrate to that country in order to escape the persecution of the infidels, but Amr's efforts to influence the Negus of Abyssinia against the Muslims proved fruitless.

When the Holy Prophet migrated to Madina in what was later to be numbered as the first year of the Hijra, peace prevailed for a while, but in the years that followed a series of battles was fought between the Muslims at Madina and the unbelievers of Mecca, in all which Amr bin Al Aas took part. At the Battle of Uhud in 3 Hijri, Amr commanded the Qureish cavalry while Khalid bin Al Waleed, who turned a near-victory of the Muslims into their defeat, served under him as commander of a squauron. And so Amr's war against Islam went on; but at no time did he gain any success. His brother, Hisham, and his son, Abdullah, became Muslims while he himself persisted in his hostility to Islam.

Amr was a very clear-headed and shrewd fellow. It took him time to see the truth of Prophet Muhammad's message, but once he had seen it his resolve to accept Islam was unshakeable. Late in the month of Muharram, 8 Hijri, he set off from Mecca with the purpose of submitting to the Holy Prophet, and whom should he encounter on the way but Khalid, also travelling with the same purpose. These men, who were later to be known as the finest military minds of the time, got to Madina and went to make their submission to the Prophet. First Khalid made his, and then it was the turn of Amr. The Prophet extended his hand towards Amr for him to hold and swear upon. Amr held the Prophet's hand and took the oath of allegiance, but cunning as he was, sought to get full advantage from his conversion. "Do I swear allegiance," he asked, "on the understanding that my past sins are forgiven? I shall then know that I start in Islam with no sins against me."

The Prophet replied: "O Amr, Islam wipes out whatever was before it of error, and the Migration wipes out whatever was between it and Islam."[1] By these words the Prophet meant the time between now and when he first began to preach Islam at Mecca. In this manner Amr bin Al Aas entered the universal brotherhood of Islam.

1. Ibn Abdul Hakam: pp 181, 251.

He was sent on a number of expeditions by the Prophet and he carried out his missions efficiently, though there were no major military actions. He was happy to be in Madina, which had an atmosphere of hope and action. For a man of his restless nature Madina offered a better opportunity for action than Mecca with its rigid, backward-looking adherence to idol-worship.

After the death of the Holy Prophet in Rabi-ul-Awwal, 11 Hijri, the flames of apostasy threatened the new state of Islam. Abu Bakr, the first Caliph of Islam, formed 11 corps to deal with the rebels in various parts of the Arabian Peninsula, details of which can be read in *The Sword of Allah.* Amr bin Al Aas was appointed to command one of these corps and was sent to the north, to operate near the Syrian border, where he severely punished certain sections of the big tribe of Kalb which had apostatised. After the apostasy had been crushed he was sent by Abu Bakr to Uman, and he was there when the Caliph decided to invade Syria.

This was in early 13 Hijri (early 634 AD). Encouraged by the successes of Khalid against the Persians in Iraq, Abu Bakr made up his mind to conquer Syria and issued a call to arms. He also wrote to Amr to return to Madina and take part in the Syrian Campaign. In reply Amr wrote: "I am one of the arrows of Allah. Shoot it where you will."[1] After this he liked to call himself the Arrow of Allah, but the title did not become as generally famous as Kahlid's title of *Sword of Allah.* Amr did, however, think of himself as God's arrow, and the thought did him no harm.

In the war in Syria, and specially in Palestine, Amr covered himself with glory. As commander of a corps he fought in most of the battles which took place in that land, including Ajnadein, Damascus, Yarmuk and others, and not only did he prove himself a redoubtable fighter but was acknowledged as the ablest and most successful general in Syria after Khalid. When the conquest of Palestine was complete and peace had been restored in Syria and Palestine in 17 Hijri (about 638 AD), he was appointed governor of Palestine and showed uncommon ability and wisdom in administering the province.

1. Tabari: vol 2, p 588.

But he never forgot Alexandria. While going to Egypt and coming back, he had taken a good look at the approaches and the general condition of the land. He had seen the open nature of the terrain, the rivers and canals being the only obstacles to movement. He had seen the wealth which awaited a conquering army. Whether after the episode of the golden ball he had any premonition of destiny or imagined himself as truly the future conqueror of Egypt, we do not know. But after his conquest of Palestine, Egypt once again came to the forefront of his mind and he began to see himself as a man who would open a new chapter in the military history of Islam. And he thought of Egypt as a plum, ripe for plucking, waiting for him.

When in the beginning of 18 Hijri (639 AD) Syria was struck by the plague of Amawas, which killed the Muslim Commander-in-Chief and several generals, Amr bin Al Aas had to quickly take command of the army. And this gave him the opportunity he needed to put his ideas about Egypt before Umar, the Caliph of the time.

2

The Reluctant Caliph

The plague of Amawas struck in January or February 639 (Muharram or Safar 18 Hijri) and ravaged Syria and Palestine. The Muslim army suffered terribly from the onslaught of the plague and twenty thousand people fell before its foul breath. It decimated Muslims and Christians and Jews and none was safe from its diseased clutches. Even Abu Ubeida, who was commander of the Muslim army in Syria, and two of his corps commanders – Shurahbeel bin Hasana and Yazeed bin Abi Sufyan – died of the contagion; and it is said that Khalid, who was a much married man, lost forty sons in the plague of Amawas. The sufferings of the Muslims continued until Amr bin Al Aas, the only surviving one of the original corps commanders who had invaded Syria, took command of the army and moved it quickly from the plains to the hilly area of Syria where the air was cleaner and the water purer. This saved the Muslim army which having annihilated many Roman armies in Syria, would itself have been annihilated by the plague.

Having saved the Muslims from destruction, Amr remained in command of the army in Syria and Palestine with his headquarters at Jabia, a cantonment constructed by Abu Ubeida a little north of the plain of Yarmuk. And it was as army commander that he received Caliph Umar when in late 18 Hijri, he came on one of his four visits to the western province of Islam.

Umar had learned to be careful with Amr bin Al Aas. He knew that he was dealing with an unusually sharp mind, one whom

Caliph Abu Bakr had called "the shrewdest of the Qureish".[1] Amr was undoubtedly one of the ablest men in the Muslim world and was a master not only of the clean fighting of war but also of the dirty scrapping of politics. He would proudly proclaim that no one had ever tricked him; and no one ever had. Apart from his remarkable brain he also had the gift of eloquence, as in fact many Arabs did. He was a great talker, though unlike many talkers, what he said mad sense. It is reported that whenever Umar met a man who would not stop talking, he would say: "Glory be to Him who created you and created Amr bin Al Aas."[2]

The Caliph and his Army Commander in the west met at Jabia where Umar had travelled to see his troops. The year 18 Hijri was coming to an end. Amr began to work on the Caliph. Two years earlier, after Jerusalem had surrendered to Umar, Amr had broached the subject tentatively but there had been no encouragement from the Caliph. Now he set about his task in right earnest. The two conferred separately, and the general outlined his ideas about conquering Egypt. He ended with the words: "O Commander of the Faithful, permit me to march on Egypt. If you conquer it, it will be a source of strength and sustenance for the Muslims. It is the richest of lands on earth and the weakest in defending itself."

The Caliph was not convinced. He feared for the safety of the Muslims and was averse to Amr's plan for the invasion of vast land like Egypt. He tended to be cautious in military matters. As a matter of fact, although the armies of Islam made great conquests during the time of Umar, many of these were due to the pressure of his generals rather than his own wish to expand the domain of Islam. In the north-east Umar had held Sad bin Abi Waqqas back after he had defeated the Persians at Qadisiyya and Ctesiphon, and it was only when provoked by Persian counter-attacks that he allowed the Muslims to go on to the final battle against the Persians at Nihawand. In the west he had refused permission to Muawia to invade Cyprus. He did not wish to extend Muslim armies beyond the point where he was sure of holding his gains. And now this stocky, aggressive general was trying to

1. Yaqubi: *Tareekh:* vol 2, p 129.
2. *Ibid:* pp 221-2.

draw him into another venture – one which could be fraught with danger.

But Amr persisted and brought his eloquence into full play. He continued to press his case, emphasising how easy it was to conquer Egypt and what tremendous benefit would accrue from its conquest to the state of Islam, until at last Umar relented. Amr could proceed on the campaign with 4,000 men.[1] This was not much of a force, but Amr had himself made the operation seem so easy that he could not very well ask for more troops, and was in any case not going to do so for fear that the Caliph might call off the operation altogether. And Umar, for his part, preferred to send a relatively small force to Egypt so that in case of disaster, Muslim losses would be limited. This was the smallest force ever sent by Islam to conquer a foreign land.

The Caliph said: "Go, and I shall seek Allah's guidance in the matter of your going. You will shortly receive a letter from me, if Allah wills it. And if it reaches you before you have entered Egypt or part of it, and I instruct you to turn back from Egypt, then turn back. But if you have entered it before my letter reaches you, then go forward and seek Allah's help and depend upon Him for succour."[2]

This was all that Amr needed. He set off from Jabia that very night with four thousand stalwarts.

* * *

Umar was left alone with his fears. He began to have second thoughts, and the more he thought the more apprehensive he grew about the consequences of the venture into which Amr was going to plunge himself. He felt that he had let himself be talked into a campaign for which he really had no desire. But having reluctantly given permission to Amr to invade Egypt, he was now reluctant to withdraw that permission.

The following day he mentioned to Usman (who was later to succeed him as Caliph) that he had permitted Amr bin Al Aas to march on Egypt, and Usman's response did nothing to calm his

1. According to some accounts the Caliph allowed him a force 3,500.
2. Ibn Abdul Hakam: p. 56; Suyuti: p 106; Yaqubi: *Tareekh:* vol 2, pp 147-8.

fears. "O Commander of the Faithful," said Usman. "Amr is an ambitious man and loves to have his own command. I fear that he will go without security and without sufficient strength and will lead the Muslims to their destruction in pursuit of an opportunity without any assurance of success."[1]

It took Umar only a little more time to make up his mind that he was not going to have anything to do with Egypt. So he wrote to Amr: "You have marched to Egypt with those who are with you. In there is a multitude of Romans while the men with you are few. If this letter reaches you before you have entered Egypt, turn back. But if it reaches you after you have entered it, then proceed, and know that I shall help you."[2]

Umar sealed the letter and gave it to a man named Uqba bin Amr, who would act as the Caliph's messenger. Umar told him to ride with all speed in the wake of the small army of Amr bin Al Aas, catch up with the general, if possible before he entered Egypt, and hand him the letter. Uqba took leave of the Caliph and set off on a fast camel in pursuit of Amr. He was aware of the contents of the letter and knew that his ride was a historic one, that the fate of Egypt and of the Muslim army preparing to invade it depended on this ride – his race with Amr bin Al Aas for the Egyptian border. And Amr, fearful of the possibility of the Caliph counter-manding his earlier order, moved fast towards Egypt. He had got to Rafah, a little short of the Egyptian frontier, when the Caliph's messenger caught up with him and offered him the Caliph's letter.

Amr was not the man to let the fears of Umar, which he regarded as quite unjustified, deter him from the venture he had set his heart upon. He was determined to take Egypt and his shrewd understanding of the working of the Caliph's mind left him in no doubt as to the contents of the Caliph's letter. Significantly, Rafah was notorious at the time as a town of thieves, it being said that even the dogs of Rafah were more thievish than dogs of other places.[3] And Amr's next action was characteristic of the man.

1. Ibn Abdul Hakam: pp 57-8
2. *Ibid* p. 57. According to Balazuiri (p 214) the Caliph actually wrote Amr a very rude letter. It is quite possible.
3. Yaqut: vol 2, p 796.

He ordered the messenger to keep the letter for a while and set his small army in motion again. A few hours later they had reached the small town of Shajratein, between Rafah and Areesh, which he knew was the first town of Egypt and marked its border. He confirmed this by questioning one of the local inhabitants.[1]

Amr then sent for the messenger, took the letter, opened and read it. It was as he had suspected. He turned to the Muslims who stood around him and, innocently, asked: "Do you not know that this town is in Egypt?" "Yes," they replied. He then told them about the Caliph's instructions to him, and added: "His letter did not reach me until after we had entered Egypt. So march on and seek Allah's blessings."[2]

* * *

Some years later, after the Muslims had conquered many lands, Caliph Umar wrote to a certain well-known scholar: "We are Arabs, and God has given us victory over the lands. We must take possession of the earth and inhabit the lands and the cities. So describe to me the cities, their climate and their dwellings, and what effect their soil and their climate have upon the inhabitants."

In reply the scholar wrote: "Know, O Commander of the Faithful, that Allah Most High has divided the earth into parts: the east, the west, the north and the south . . . . ."

He went on to describe the various lands conquered by Islam, and then he came to Egypt. "As for Egypt, it is a spacious and low-lying land. It is the country of the pharaohs and the home of tyrants. It is only praiseworthy because of the virtue of its Nile. Its defects outnumber its attractions: its air is motionless, its heat intense, its mischief destructive. It deadens the colour, corrupts the intelligence and increases anger. It is a mine of gold and jewels and emeralds and wealth.

"It is a land of crops. It fattens the body and darkens the skin and lengthens life. In its people there is cunning and dishonesty

1. According to Yaqut (vol 3 p 661 Areesh was the last town of Syria; according to Yaqubi (Al Buldan: p 330) it was the first of Egypt. I have taken the latter version as correct.
2. Ibn Abdul Hakam: p 57; Balazuri: p 214; Yaqut: vol 4, p 894.

and wickedness and guile and deceit. Lo, it is a land to gain, not a land to live in, because of the nearness of its mischief and the abundance of its evil."[1]

The Arabs knew a good deal about Egypt, but a good deal of what they knew was fancy and legend rather than fact. Some of these legends are extremely interesting and will be narrated at places in this book – offered by this writer without comment. The Holy Prophet is known to have had a soft spot for Egypt and described it as "the treasure-house of Allah upon the earth."[2] He is also reported to have said, "Whoever wishes to see paradise or look upon the likes of it on earth, let him look at the land of Egypt when its crops are green and its fruits are ripe."[3]

The only one who had first hand knowledge of Egypt was Amr bin Al Aas, and he had acquired it by travelling to Alexandria in his younger days. In a vague sort of way, however, all knew that Egypt was a vast land with immense wealth and that it had a history of civilization and refinement unequalled in the world. Geographically, the country stretched north-south from Areesh to Aswan, and east-west from Eila (now Eilat in the Gulf of Aqaba) to Barqa (near the present Benghazi). And this was the land which Amr set out to conquer in late 18 Hijri (late 639 AD). He was 48 years of age.[4]

* * *

We will not go into the history of the land which the Muslims were now to invade. The history of Egypt is too long and too complex to be summarised in a few pages. So we will take Egypt as it was in the year 639 and hope that the reader has some knowledge of its ancient past stretching over more than four thousand years of recorded history before the arrival of the Muslims. As a matter of interest, however, the charming legend of the settlement of Egypt after the Flood, as noted by Muslim chroniclers, is given below. It may be, and probably is, nothing more than a legend.

1. Masudi: *Muruj*; vol 2, pp 62-3.
2. Suyuti: p 17.
3. *Ibid*: p 16.
4. There are many variations in the date of the start of the campaign in Egypt. I have chosen one which makes sense to me.

The Prophet Noah had three sons (according to some accounts, four): Sam, Ham and Yafis. Early one morning, and this was after the Flood, he was praying to God to bestow upon his sons and their progeny success and all the good things of life. Suddenly God told him that He would. Delighted at the divine response to his prayers and eager to tell his sons and their sons the good news, he called to them. They were all fast asleep and none awoke except Sam. He in turn called his sons but of them also none awoke except one named Arfakhshad. Sam and Arfakhshad – father and son – came running to Noah. Noah prayed to God for His blessings upon these two and their descendents.

Noah then called to Ham who had not responded to the earlier call. Ham merely turned over and went on sleeping. His sons did not pay any attention either to the old man's call, but his grandson, Misr, son of Baisar, son of Ham, heard the call and came up running. Noah was delighted to see his young great-grandson. He placed his hand upon the boy's head and prayed to God to bless him and his progeny, to settle him in a fine land which would be the mother of lands, whose river would be the greatest of rivers, to give him the best of everything and to make the earth subservient unto him.

God settled Misr, along with others of his clan, in Egypt, and allotted him all the land which lay between Areesh and Aswan and between Barqa and Eila. Misr built the city of Memphis, which was the first city built after the Flood, and became the father of the Copts. After him this land came to be called Misr, which is the name by which Egypt is known in the world of Islam.[1]

And Allah knows best!

1. Ibn Abdul Hakam: pp 7-9

3

The March to Memphis

The Muslims marched to Memphis. It was a mounted march, the men riding their camels and leading their horses, ready to change their mounts at a moment's notice should the sudden appearance of an enemy require military action. This was the way of the Arab march when long distances had to be covered. The column plodded through the wilderness of sand, along the beaten trail, traversing the barrenness of the northern reaches of the Sinai Desert. But the desert held no terrors for these hard-faced, hawk-eyed men, for they were warriors of the desert.

The soldiers marched on, on their lips a prayer to Allah for succour, in their hearts a trust in their commander which only the best of commanders can earn. They marched with an assurance born of victory in the field – victory in a dozen battles where they had made the mighty Roman bite the dust. These men who marched into Egypt were victorious men; they belonged to an army of conquerors.

The regiments of this army did not have battle honours emblazoned upon their standards. It was not the custom of the time. Had it been so, their standards would have bent under the weight of their glory. Among their battle honours they would have counted such names as Ajnadein, Beisan and Yaqusa, names like Emessa, Qinassareen and Marj-ur-Rum, such terrible names as Yarmuk – the battle of the century, the greatest clash between

Islam and Christendom, in which a Roman army of 150,000 men had been squarely beaten in battle, its soldiers slaughtered in large numbers, its remnants driven in disorder from the field. Khalid, the Sword of Allah, had commanded the Muslim army and Yarmuk had been the high-water-mark of his career, his rendezvous with destiny. But Amr and his men had also played a prominent part in that battle. They had formed the corps on the Muslim right, had seen some of the roughest fighting of the six-day battle and had come out of it with flying colours. And now, from Shajratein, these tigers of the desert, these hardened veterans of countless battles who did not know the meaning of defeat, marched towards the heart of Egypt.

On the same morning, after a short journey of 6 miles, they arrived at Areesh, the first proper town of Egypt. It was a fine town, some sort of a seat of governmental authority. In pharaonic times it had held the frontier garrison of Egypt, but now it had no troops. The Muslims arrived at Areesh to find themselves overtaken by the feast of Id-ul-Adha and the annual pilgrimage to Mecca which commemorates the profferred sacrifice of Ismail by Prophet Abraham: the 10th of Zul Haj, 18 Hijri, (December 11, 639). The Muslims offered sacrifices; Amr bin Al Aas slaughtered a ram.

The Muslims were in no hurry. Having got into Egypt, Amr needed time to finalise his plans, and his soldiers lingered at Areesh, celebrating the feast for several days. Meanwhile the Roman authorities at Alexandria, the capital of Egypt, came to know of the invasion of their land, prepared forces for action and took counter-measures to oppose the advance of the Muslims. These measures included the reinforcement of Farma, their most advanced garrison. (See Map 1).

The Muslims resumed their march and some time in the latter half of Zul Haj (December) arrived at Farma, a place which in Roman times had been known as Pelusium. It was the key to Egypt, because all invasions from Asia had to pass through this place and it opened up all routes into the interior – to Alexandria and to Memphis. It was an awful place, known for its bad climate and its bad water, as a result of which its inhabitants were pale and

thin.[1] But it was a strongly fortified town which could be supplied by sea when besieged by land, and was manned by a Roman garrison of unknown strength.

Farma was the first place in Egypt where the Muslims encountered resistance, and the resistance proved tenacious. The Romans were determined to fight on for as long as their supplies lasted, and since the Romans commanded the sea and could supply the garrison without interference by the Muslims, they had a good chance of holding out indefinitely.

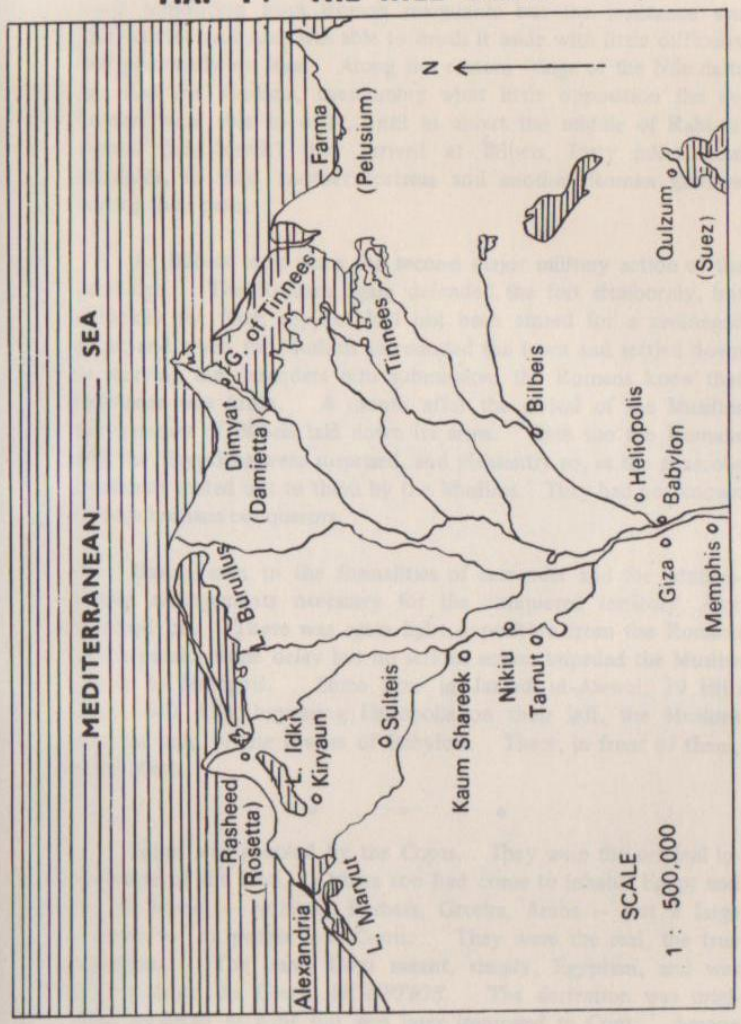
The Muslims laid siege to the town from the landward side but could do nothing to prevent entrance and exit by sea. The siege went on for nearly two months, with sally and counter-sally, and the Romans fought stubbornly and repulsed every assault by the Muslims. Finally, Farma was taken by storm. A Muslim assault group led by Useifa bin Wa'la assaulted the fort and captured the gate, through which the rest of the army poured into the town. Roman resistance collapsed almost immediately. This happened about the middle of Safar, 19 Hijri (mid-February, 640).

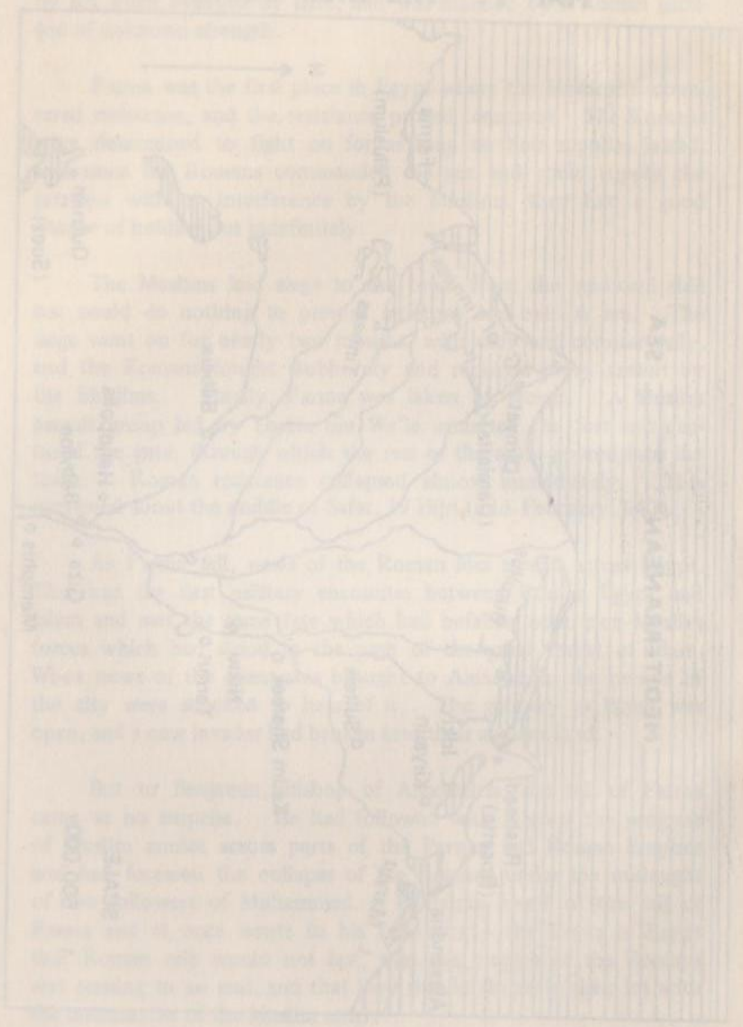
As Farma fell, news of the Roman loss spread across Egypt. This was the first military encounter between Roman Egypt and Islam and met the same fate which had befallen other non-Muslim forces which had stood in the path of the great thrust of Islam. When news of the event was brought to Alexandria, the people of the city were shocked to hear of it. The gateway to Egypt was open, and a new invader had broken into their ancient land.

But to Benjamin, Bishop of Alexandria, the fall of Farma came as no surprise. He had followed with interest the progress of Muslim armies across parts of the Persian and Roman Empires and had foreseen the collapse of the Romans under the onslaught of the followers of Muhammad. Benjamin heard of the fall of Farma and at once wrote to his followers – the Copts of Egypt that Roman rule would not last, that the empire of the Romans was coming to an end, and that they should throw in their lot with the commander of the Muslim army.[2]

1. Yaqut: vol 3, p 883.
2. Ibn Abdul Hakam: p 58.

MAP I: THE NILE DELTA





Meanwhile the Muslims moved on from Farma. They faced some opposition from Roman rearguards but the resistance was half-hearted and Amr was able to brush it aside with little difficulty and practically no loss. Along the eastern fringe of the Nile delta marched the Muslims, overcoming what little opposition the defenders were able to offer, until in about the middle of Rabi-ul-Awwal (mid-March) they arrived at Bilbeis, forty miles from Memphis, to find another fortress and another Roman garrison barring their path.

At Bilbeis took place the second major military action of the campaign. The Romans again defended the fort stubbornly, but unluckily for them supplies had not been stored for a prolonged siege; and when the Muslims surrounded the town and settled down to starving the defenders into submission, the Romans knew that resistance was futile. A month after the arrival of the Muslims the garrison of Bilbeis laid down its arms. Here too the Romans and the Egyptians were surprised, and pleasantly so, at the generous treatment meted out to them by the Muslims. They had not known of such humane conquerors.

Having seen to the formalities of surrender and the administrative arrangements necessary for the conquered territory, Amr marched on. There was again light opposition from the Romans which caused some delay but no serious action impeded the Muslim march to Memphis. Some time in Jamadi-ul-Awwal, 19 Hijri (May, 640 AD), bypassing Heliopolis on their left, the Muslims came in sight of the towers of Babylon. There, in front of them, stood Misr!

* * *

Egypt was peopled by the Copts. They were the original inhabitants of the land. Others too had come to inhabit Egypt and call it home – Nubians, Berbers, Greeks, Arabs – but a large majority of its people was Coptic. They were the real, the true Egyptians. The name Copt meant, simply, Egyptian, and was derived from the Greek *AIGUPTIOS*. The derivation was originally rendered as Kibt but was later improved to Copt. Among the early Muslim historians too these people are sometimes referred to as Qibt.

When Heraclius, Emperor of the Byzantine Empire, or Eastern Rome as historians have called it, or just Rome as the Muslims knew it, reconquered Egypt from the Persians in 631, he appointed as Patriarch of Alexandria and head of the civil administration in Egypt a man whom the Muslims knew as Maqauqas. His actual name was Cyrus – Jureij to Muslim historians.[1] According to some historians he was a Greek; according to others a Copt. Most of the evidence, however, supports his being a Copt, and he had been treated accordingly in this book.

As a churchman, Maqauqas was supreme in Egypt – head of the Coptic branch of the Christian Church, and in his civil and political capacity he was the Viceroy or Governor of Egypt. There is no need to confuse the reader by confronting him with Roman administrative titles like consul, proconsul, prefect, etc; it is enough for him to know that the position of Maqauqas was that of Viceroy of Egypt on behalf of the Roman Emperor. With his capital at Alexandria and armed with religious and temporal authority this man ruled over Egypt. He even had at his call a sizable Roman army led by able generals, which he could use when required to enforce the Roman law and maintain the Roman peace. When Maqauqas spoke, he spoke for the Emperor; and he spoke for all Egypt.

Twelve years before the march of the Muslims into Egypt, in the beginning of the 7th year of the Hijra, Prophet Muhammad had addressed letters to the rulers of lands which bordered Islam, and sent these letters with envoys specially chosen for the task. These envoys spoke the language of the nations to which they were sent, and the letters they carried were letters of invitation to join the new faith of Islam. Letters were sent, among others, to Chosroes Parwez of Persia, Emperor Heraclius of Byzantium and the Negus of Ethiopia (known to the Muslims as Najjashi). A letter was also sent by the Holy Prophet to Maqauqas. It was carried by a Muslim named Hatib bin Abi Balta'a and it read:

> In the name of Allah, the Beneficent, the Merciful. From Muhammad, Messenger of Allah, to Maqauqas, Lord of the

1. Suyuti: p 254.

> Copts. Peace be upon whosoever follows the guidance. I invite you to Islam. Submit to Islam and be at peace. If you accept Islam, Allah will reward you twice.

By this the Prophet meant the reward of this world and the reward of the next. In the next part of his letter he quoted a Quranic verse:–

> "O People of the Book, come to the call which is the same for us and for you: that we will not worship anyone but Allah, and not associate partners with Him, and not take some from amongst ourselves as gods apart from Allah. And if you turn to us, declare: "We bear witness that we are Muslims."[1]

This letter was brought by Hatib into the presence of Maqauqas at Alexandria. The ruler of Egypt took the Prophet's letter and read it; then remained silent for a few minutes, lost in thought. He had heard a great deal about Muhammad and his message and all that the Apostle had suffered in the cause of the new faith. Suddenly he shot a question at Hatib, hoping to catch him off balance: "If he is a prophet, what prevents him from sending curses upon me and thus overcoming me?"

Calmly the envoy replied, "What prevented Jesus, son of Mary, from sending curses upon those who opposed him, to have done what was to be done?"

Maqauqas fell silent again and Hatib began a short but eloquent speech about Moses and Jesus and Muhammad and the new faith of Islam. He ended with the words; "Our call to you to follow the Quran is no different to your call to the People of the Torah to follow the Bible. We do not forbid you the religion of Jesus; rather we urge it upon you."[2]

Maqauqas asked a number of searching questions about the Prophet and about Islam, which Hatib answered with skill. Then the envoy was led out of the presence of the Patriarch. Maqauqas would not become a Muslim. Either he was not sufficiently con-

1. Ibn Abdul Hakam: p 46.
2. Suyuti: pp 97-8; Ibn Abdul Hakam: p 46.

vinced of the truth of Islam or he was too closely wedded to the Coptic Church of which he was lord and master; or, as he himself professed, he feared that his co-religionists would not follow him and there might be a serious rift which would bring harm to his native land. But he thought well of the Prophet of the Desert, and he thought well of the Prophet's emissary.

Maqauqas returned Hatib with a courteous letter to the Prophet and with the emissary he sent a number of gifts to the Prophet: two beautiful Coptic girls, a mule, an ass, a robe and a jar of honey. The Prophet kept one of the girls, Maria, for himself and gave the other, Seereen, to a Companion. Maria in due course became the mother of the Prophet's son Ibrahim, who died when he was 16 months old. The mule was given the name of Duldul and the ass Yafur, and both became the Prophet's favourite mounts. The honey was consumed with much pleasure.

The Holy Prophet used to refer to the Copts as the in-laws of the Arabs, and Maria was not the only reason for this. But more of that later.

* * *

Egypt is the gift of the Nile. It is virtually the Nile. It is the Nile which has made it what it is and whatever it has been. Without the Nile which separates the Western Desert of Egypt from its Eastern Desert, all Egypt would be as barren as its deserts-fit only for the habitation of lizards and nomads. Coming through Upper Egypt, i.e. the south, the Nile is a mighty river at Memphis which forms the boundary between Upper Egypt and the Delta. The delta is like a triangle with sides more than 100 miles long, with its apex at Memphis and its base on the Mediterranean coast from Alexandria to Tinnees. A little below Memphis the Nile splits into two main channels; one turning north-west to Rasheed (Rosetta) and the other north-east to Dimyat (Damietta). But apart from these two main channels, countless streams and distributaries criss-cross the delta, carrying the silt-laden waters of the Nile to the farms of Egypt. (See Map 1).

The two biggest cities of Egypt were Memphis and Alexandria. The latter, founded by Alexander the Great, was the capital of Egypt at the time of the Muslim invasion and was in an international

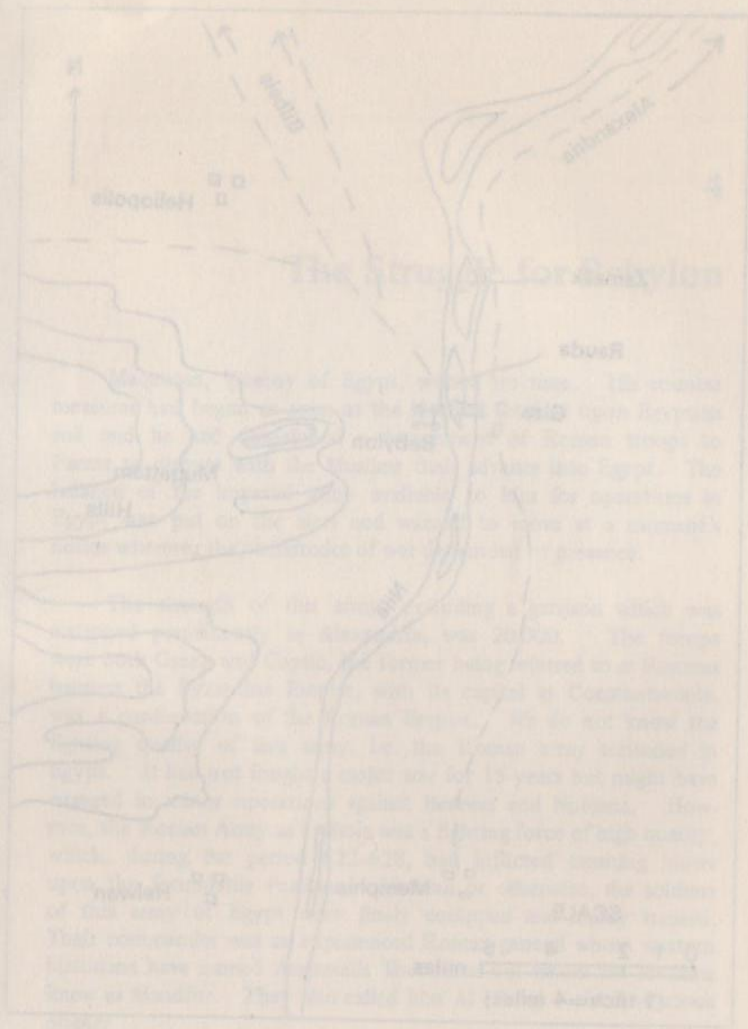
sense the more important of the two. It was a big naval base from which the Romans could exert strong influence over the Mediterranean, which in turn gave them freedom of movement over the sea. Memphis, on the other hand, was important in a continental sense. It did not directly affect Alexandria or the sea, but it was the controlling point at which an invasion cut Egypt in two. It separated Upper Egypt (south) from Lower Egypt (north) and dominated all movement between the two. While Alexandria was the jewel of maritime Egypt, Memphis was the prize of continental Egypt. For an attack on the cities of the coast, the possession of Memphis was of inestimable value; from here one could move to any point on the Mediterranean coast between Alexandria and Tinnees.

But when we speak of the strategic importance of Memphis, we speak not of one but of a group of cities – mainly three – which together formed what the Muslims called Misr. The oldest was Memphis, lying on the west bank of the Nile, founded in 3100 BC as capital of ancient Egypt by Menes. The Muslims called it Manf. Stretching north from Saqqara, it included Giza within its outer boundaries in the sense of a Greater Memphis embracing its outlying townships. And it remained capital of Egypt until Alexandria was founded by Alexander and replaced Memphis as the capital. Memphis was the main city of the Pharaohs, and of Joseph and Moses.

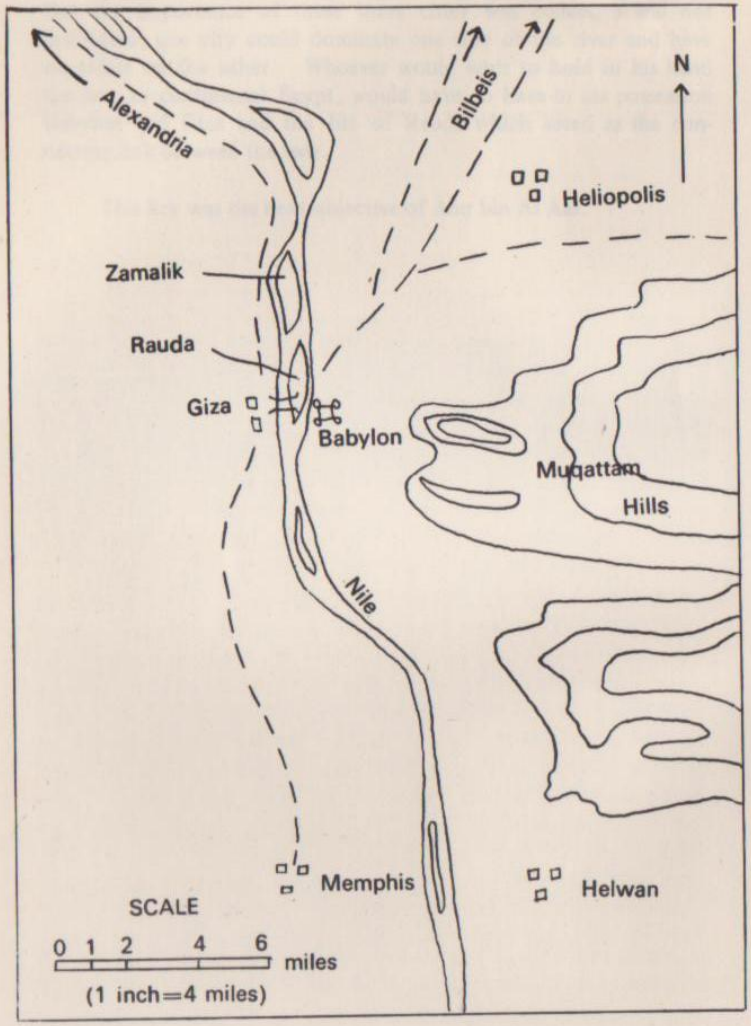
On the east bank of the river, opposite Giza, stood Babylon, connected with the west bank by a bridge. A strong fort, built by Emperor Trajan of Rome early in the 2nd Century, guarded the eastern approaches to the bridge. Ten miles north-east of the bridge glittered the temple city of Heliopolis – Ein Shams to the Arabs – where the pharaohs came to worship. The pharaohs ruled mainly in Memphis and worshipped mainly in Heliopolis, the City of the Sun, now Misr-al-Jadida. As a matter of interest it was in Heliopolis that Zuleikha (Potiphar's wife of the Old Testament) tried in vain to seduce the beautiful Joseph. Between Babylon and Memphis, several islands rose in the Nile, the most important of which was Rauda, through which ran the road from Babylon to Giza and upon which rested the bridges of the Nile.

The most defensible of the three cities, and the toughest nut to crack, was Babylon. The least detensible, because it was detached from the other two and away from the Nile, was Heliopolis. But the importance of these three cities was collective and not individual; one city could dominate one side of the river and have no effect on the other. Whoever would wish to hold in his hand the key to continental Egypt, would have to have in his possession Babylon and Giza and the Isle of Rauda which acted as the connecting link between the two.

This key was the next objective of Amr bin Al Aas.



MAP 2: THE REGION OF BABYLON



4

The Struggle for Babylon

Maqauqas, Viceroy of Egypt, wasted no time. His counter measures had begun as soon as the Muslims set foot upon Egyptian soil and he had despatched a detachment of Roman troops to Farma to dispute with the Muslims their advance into Egypt. The balance of the imperial army available to him for operations in Egypt was put on the alert and warned to move at a moment's notice wherever the vicissitudes of war demanded its presence.

The strength of this army, excluding a garrison which was stationed permanently in Alexandria, was 20,000. The troops were both Greek and Coptic, the former being referred to as Romans because the Byzantine Empire, with its capital at Constantinople, was a continuation of the Roman Empire. We do not know the fighting quality of this army, i.e. the Roman army stationed in Egypt. It had not fought a major war for 15 years but might have engaged in minor operations against Berbers and Nubians. However, the Roman Army as a whole was a fighting force of high quality, which, during the period 622-628, had inflicted crushing blows upon the formidable Persians. Veteran or otherwise, the soldiers of this army of Egypt were finely equipped and highly trained. Their commander was an experienced Roman general whom western historians have named Augustalis Theodorus but whom the Muslims knew as Mandfur. They also called him Al U'eirij – *the Obnoxious Snake!*

When Farma fell in February 640 and Amr bin Al Aas advanced towards Bilbeis, Maqauqas knew the direction in which the Muslims were headed. He at once set his army in motion, leaving the local garrison of Alexandria for the protection of the city, and after a few days of marching his 20,000 men arrived at Babylon. Here a Roman legion (about 5,000 soldiers) was already stationed for the protection of the cities of Memphis and Babylon, and the Roman Commander-in-Chief absorbed this legion into his own field army.

Preparations were started immediately to strengthen Babylon as a fortress. While the Muslims advanced and got committed in the siege of Bilbeis – late March and most of April – the Romans prepared Babylon for a siege. Provisions were gathered, battlements repaired, troops positioned and instructed in their roles. Heliopolis had its own garrison for local defence and also made its preparations, but there was no connecting link between the two places.

At Babylon there was not enough accommodation to house the field army within the fort, so the bulk of the army encamped outside the fort walls and dug a deep ditch forward of its camps, across the northern approach to Babylon. This ditch not only gave local protection to the troops in the camp but also added strength to the fort by increasing the attacker's difficulties. A few places on the perimeter of the ditch were left undug, to act as natural bridges across the ditch, and iron spikes were strewn in front of these gaps to prevent or delay attack. There is no mention of any engines in Babylon – ballistas or catapults for hurling stones – but otherwise the Roman army under the Obnoxious Snake was fully prepared for battle in strong defence when Amr bin Al Aas turned up to conquer the place some time in May 640 (Jamadi-ul-Awwal 19 Hijri).

The Muslims, having bypassed Heliopolis on their left, appeared in front of Babylon. They knew of this place, except that they called it *Bab-al-Yun* . . . . . the Gate of Yun.[1] As the Muslims arrived at the place, they found a large Roman army arrayed for battle-

1. Some accounts have confused Babylon with Umm Zunein which was a township distinct from, and about three miles north-east of, Babylon.

some of it on the battlements and the rest standing behind the ditch with strong detachments positioned forward of the ditch to protect the crossing.

Over the heads of the Roman soldiers, the Muslims could see the fort of Babylon rising in awesome grandeur. It was a massive piece of military engineering, 60 feet high with walls more than six feet thick, built of brick and stone. There were several towers or bastions, some of which gave added protection to gates located beside them or beneath them. Many of these bastions consisted of three storeys, the lower ones being used for living quarters and stores and work rooms. The fort was irregular in shape, having its north-eastern wall as its longest side and its western wall running along the Nile, which was more easterly then (about where the railway line now runs). In size the fort covered an area about 350 yards by 350 yards. Thus the defences of Babylon consisted of the iron spikes, the ditch, the ramparts and, above all, the Roman soldiers, without whom the rest would be useless. (See Map 3).

To the east, and a bit north-east, of the fort rose a low, bare ridge, about 50 high. A spur which ran from the top towards the west, between the fort and the Muslim approach, was hardly perceptible, being only just above ground level, but the spur which ran southwards to about 400 yards east of the fort was more pronounced and was crowned by a round citadel-like rock structure. This bare ridge was not occupied.[1]

As soon as Amr arrived at Babylon, he formed up his army of 4,000 warriors in assault formation and attacked the Roman detachments directly in front of him. This led to some hard fighting but the attack was repulsed by the Romans. Amr pulled his men back and went into camp, not far from the east bank of the Nile.

* * *

It was futile for Amr to attack a force six times larger than his own, if he intended to gain a tactical success. But his purpose was otherwise. He knew very well the numerical superiority of the Romans facing him and realised that should the Romans take

1. The ruins of a small fort stand atop this ridge today, but this fort was not there then.

the offensive against him while having the benefit of able and aggressive leadership, they could make mincemeat of his small army. He might even have to withdraw from Egypt and go back to Arabia, and after all that he had said to the Caliph about the ease with which Egypt could be conquered, a humiliating return from Egypt would be worse than a defeat in battle. He had to make sure that the Romans did not adopt an offensive posture, and there was no better way of doing this than by attacking them with the utmost violence. The reputation already established by the Muslims of being aggressive, hard-hitting, battle-hungry warriors would help him. So Amr attacked the Romans, and the Romans repulsed his attack. But they were taken aback by the vigour and violence of the Muslim assault.

On the following morning the Muslims again attacked Roman forces forward of the ditch. Again the attack was repulsed. In the evening the Muslims launched an attack on another sector of the front, but this too was repulsed. The next day again the Muslims attacked, in the morning and the evening, again with no apparent success. The next day again. . . . . .and so this drama rolled on with Muslim attacks once a day and twice a day, sometimes on this part of the Roman front, sometimes on that. After a few days of this Amr stopped his attacks. He had achieved his purpose, albeit a short-term one. And to make his few troops appear more in strength, he split them into small groups and spread them out over a large area.

The Romans were not deceived. By now they had come to know the Muslim strength and saw through Amr's stratagem of spreading his troops to make them appear numerically stronger. Sometimes, when talking to the Muslims across the ditch, they would laugh and say, "We know what you are doing. We know that your strength is only . . . . . " And they would give the exact number of soldiers in the Muslim army.[1]

The Romans knew the Muslim strength and laughed at their unsuccessful attempts at deception, but they never came out of their defences. Such had been the impact of the Muslim attacks, as intended by Amr, that the Romans adopted a totally defensive

1. Ibn Abdul Hakam: p 61.

posture and preferred the safety of their entrenchments to fighting in the open. In the numerous clashes of arms which took place the Romans were individually no match for their adversaries; it was only their greater numerical strength and their better equipment which enabled them to withstand the assaults of the finely-trained, superbly-conditioned and battle-hardened soldiers of Islam. It would be several months before they would pick up enough courage to come out of their defences. And in order to keep them that way, Amr would continue to launch occasional raids against now this detachment, now that one.

Amr waited. Having put the Romans in a defensive mood, he gained the advantage of the initiative and freedom of action for his small army and ensured its survival in the land of Egypt. But this was a temporary expedient, actually a negative one if it did not lead to more worthwhile results. Amr could see no way of achieving victory with the prevalent ratio of relative strengths, but he waited with the characteristic patience of the desert Arab for an opportunity to present itself. He was averse to writing to Umar for help, averse to admitting his failure to take Babylon and his error in assuming that the conquest of Egypt would be a picnic. The thought of writing such a letter hurt his proud spirit.

For two months the confrontation wore on with the Romans sitting tight in their defences and repulsing the frequent Muslim attacks against the crossings of the ditch. The Muslims began to tire. There was no sign of victory, and they were not getting any stronger. Amr now felt that he could delay matters no longer. He would have to come off his high horse and eat humble pie. So some time in July 640 (Rajab 19 Hijri) he wrote to Umar and asked for help.

The Caliph was impatiently awaiting results. At this time there were no very serious actions being fought in the Persian theatre or the Syrian theatre. The most active theatre was the Egyptian one. The Caliph had only reluctantly given permission for the invasion of Egypt, against his better judgement, but having sanctioned the expedition he was not the man to take a negative, "I-told-you-so" attitude. Within days of receipt of Amr's letter, reinforcements from Arabia were on their way to Egypt. They

moved in groups, their movement went on for 2 to 3 weeks, and a month after he had sent his plea for help, i.e. in about August, Amr received 4,000 reinforcements.

Amr took up the offensive with greater vigour. Again he attacked the Romans at the crossings of the ditch, putting in assaults morning and evening, but his attacks could make no headway against Roman resistance. They cut down a large number of Romans, but they did not make a single dent in the defences of Babylon. The attacks had to be called off.

Not knowing what else to do, Amr again wrote to the Caliph and pleaded for more help.

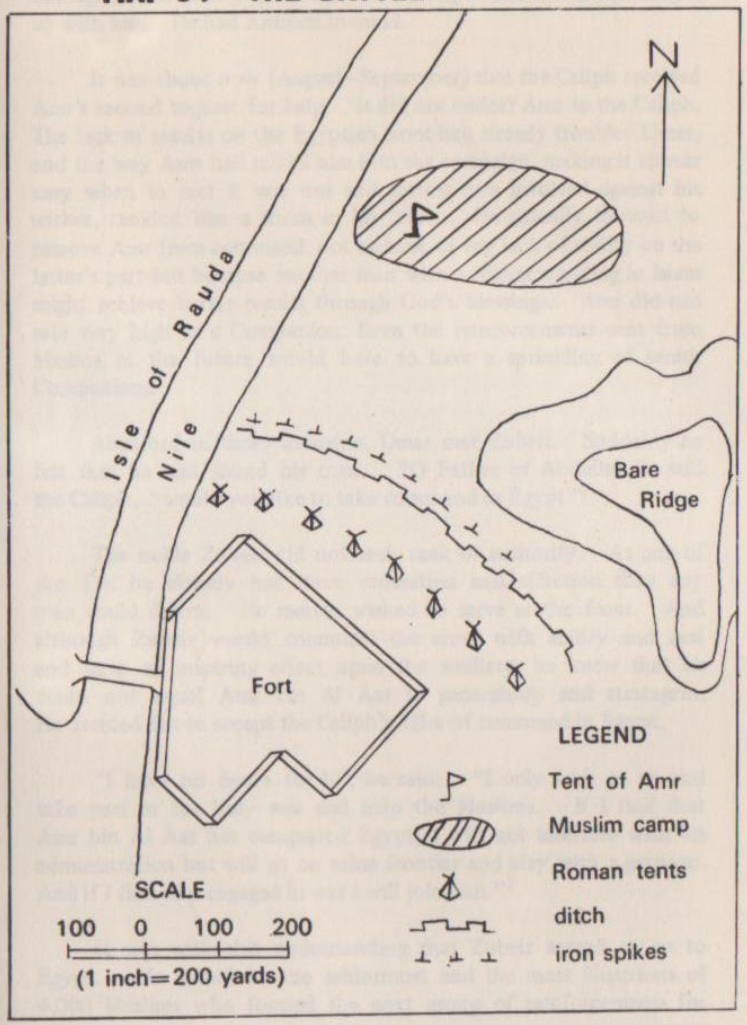
* * *

Zubeir bin Al Awwam was a fine man. He was a fine soldier, a fine leader, a fine person, noted for his chivalrous nature and his prowess, strength and courage as a fighter. He was a cousin of the Prophet, his mother, Safiyya, being a sister of the Prophet's father, Abdullah. And Safiyya too was quite a lady; in the Battle of the Ditch she had single-handedly fought and clubbed an enemy soldier to death. Zubeir was a fine-looking man too, with a fair complexion and a thin beard. He was more than of medium height, though not tall.

He had fought in every battle of early Islam beside the Prophet and was one of the most trusted of the Prophet's Companions. What is more, after the Prophet's death, he had continued to serve on distant fronts, unlike many other top level Companions. He had fought in the Battle of Yarmuk under Khalid bin Al Waleed, and his wife (a daughter of Abu Bakr) had been present with him in battle. As a Companion Zubeir belonged to the highest stratum. There were ten Muslims who had been informed by the Prophet that they had already been accepted by God in paradise, and these 10 were usually referred to as "the-ten-who-have-been-given-the-glad-tidings", and sometimes simply as "the Ten". Zubeir was one of the Ten.

Time hung heavy on Zubeir's hands. He had continued to serve in the Syrian theatre until the campaign ended with the fall of

MAP 3: THE BATTLE OF BABYLON I



Antioch late in 16 Hijri. Then he had returned to Madina. After more than two years of peaceful living, however, he felt like going out again and seeing a little more action, before the years caught up with him. He had Antioch in mind.

It was about now (August–September) that the Caliph received Amr's second request for help. It did not endear Amr to the Caliph. The lack of results on the Egyptian front had already troubled Umar, and the way Amr had talked him into the campaign, making it appear easy when in fact it was not and getting him involved against his wishes, rankled like a thorn in his side. He actually thought to remove Amr from command, not because of any lack of ability on the latter's part but because another man with a higher standing in Islam might achieve better results through God's blessings. Amr did not rate very high as a Companion. Even the reinforcements sent from Madina in the future would have to have a sprinkling of senior Companions.

Absorbed in these thoughts, Umar met Zubeir. Suddenly he felt that he had found his man. "O Father of Abdullah," said the Caliph, "would you like to take command in Egypt"?

The noble Zubeir did not seek rank or authority. As one of the Ten he already had more veneration and affection than any man could desire. He merely wished to serve at the front. And although Zubeir would command the army with ability and zeal and have an inspiring effect upon the soldiery, he knew that he could not equal Amr bin Al Aas in generalship and stratagem. He decided not to accept the Caliph's offer of command in Egypt.

"I have no desire for it", he said. "I only wish to go and take part in the holy war and help the Muslims. If I find that Amr bin Al Aas has conquered Egypt, I will not interfere with his administration but will go on some frontier and stay with a garrison. And if I find him engaged in war I will join him."[1]

It was with this understanding that Zubeir agreed to go to Egypt. He would be the seniormost and the most illustrious of 4,000 Muslims who formed the next group of reinforcements for

1. Balazuri: P 214.

the Egyptian theatre. And this time Umar would send not just troops who would form the rank and file of the army, but also some special men – holy, venerated, distinguished – whose presence with the soldiery would be a battle-winning factor. He picked four officers, each to command a thousand men, and each of whom was regarded as the equal of a thousand. These four men were: Zubeir bin Al Awwam, Miqdad bin Al Aswad, Ubada bin As-Samit and Kharija bin Huzafa.[1]

When despatching these 4,000 men to Egypt, the Caliph wrote and informed Amr bin Al Aas about it. He added: "I have appointed over each thousand a man who is himself the equal of a thousand. And know that you have 12,000 men, and 12,000 cannot be overwhelmed because of lack of numbers."[2]

Umar was, perhaps unwittingly, influenced in this matter by the Persian custom of having gladiators as special champions of the army. The Persians would pick out young men noted for their strength, size and ferocity and have them so highly trained in the arts of combat that they would become the perfect specimens of the fighting man. They would then be regarded as equal to a thousand warriors and would be called *hazar mard*, i.e. a thousand men. Sometimes a general wishing to reinforce a part of the front would send one of these fearsome fighters and claim that he had sent a thousand men. And such was their performance in battle that no one ever disputed their title: *hazar mard.*

So Umar sent his 4,000 warriors to Egypt led by four who were the Muslim equivalents of *hazar mard*, physically and spiritually, with Zubeir acting as commander of the column for the move. As the column filed out of Madina, someone wishing to deter Zubeir from the Egyptian venture, whispered to him, "There is nothing there but war and pestilence."

Zubeir answered, simply: "We are only going for war and pestilence."[3]

* * *

1. According to some sources the fourth was Maslama bin Al Mukhallad but I discount this because at this time Maslama was just 18 years of age (Ibn Abdul Hakam: p. 93) and could not have been a renowned hero.
2. Yaqubi: *Tareekh;* vol 2, p 148; Ibn Abdul Hakam : p 61.
3. Balazuri: p 215.

The arrival of the 4,000 reinforcements, led by four high-ranking Companions, was a cause of jubilation among the Muslims at Babylon. Apart from the four commanders of a thousand there were several other Companions, and the presence in battle of men blessed by the company of their beloved Prophet was a factor highly valued by the Muslims. Moreover, 12,000 men were 12,000 men, and their new numerical strength gave the Muslims a 1 : 2 ratio with the Romans in Babylon, compared with the 1 : 6 ratio with which they had started this battle. Their strength would actually increase by another few hundred over the next couple of months. It was now about the end of September (early Shawwal).[1]

As soon as Zubeir arrived at Babylon, he went round the arc of the ditch and carried out a reconnaissance. He could discover no flaws, no openings. The two commanders then decided to attempt another attack along the whole front, and try and secure one or more of the crossings of the ditch, relying for success upon the increased strength of the Muslim army.

A few days later this attack was put in. It led to heavy fighting and the Roman detachments positioned forward of the ditch were driven behind the ditch, which was some tactical gain, but beyond that the Muslims achieved no success; the ditch and Roman resistance behind it remained as before – unshaken and impenetrable.

Having driven in the Roman detachments, Amr and Zubeir turned their attention to Heliopolis, 10 miles away, almost behind them. The shock treatment given by Amr to the Romans in order to deprive them of the desire for aggressive action had produced an effect on Heliopolis also, whose garrison never ventured out of the fort. But the possibility of its coming out was always there. Whether some event occurred to draw Amr's attention to Heliopolis or Zubeir pointed out to him his strategical vulnerability, we do not know, but Amr somehow realised the danger inherent in leaving Heliopolis in Roman hands. Should the main Roman army make a sally from Babylon at the same time as the garrison

1. There is some disagreement about the actual Muslim strength at Babylon but it is not very important. They were 12,000 strong and a little more. We are told that on conclusion of the siege the Muslim strength was 12,300 (Suyuti: p 129; Yaqut: vol 3, p 895.)

of Heliopolis came out to operate behind the Muslim, the latter would be sandwiched between two forces and suffer grievous harm. They could even be wiped out.

So Amr took a large part of the army to deal with Heliopolis, leaving a sufficient number to keep watch over Babylon. The very first action was a cavalry clash just outside Heliopolis in which the Romans seem to have done rather well because the Muslim cavalry became very cautious after this. Amr was angry with the troopers and abused them, whereupon one trooper (a fellow from the Yaman) said, "We are not made of stone, nor of iron."

This made Amr even more angry. "Quiet, you dog!" he shouted at the soldier. And the soldier replied quietly, "Then you are a commander of dogs!"[1]

What happened to the soldier thereafter we do not know, but such cases of insubordination were rare among the Muslims. However, shortly after turning to Heliopolis Zubeir scaled the wall of the fort, followed by a few hand-picked warriors, and the local garrison sued for peace. They got it, on payment of the Jizya, and were happy to see that no other burden was imposed upon them.

Having cleared Heliopolis of enemy soldiers and eliminated the threat to their communications and their rear, Amr and Zubeir led their troops back to Babylon. They returned to find the Roman detachments re-established forward of the ditch, like before, and the Roman camp buzzing with activity, unlike before.

It was now some time in October 640.

* * *

The mood of the Romans had changed. We do not know the reasons for this. Perhaps the failure of the Muslim efforts to breach the Babylon defences had made them bolder. Perhaps the Muslim presence on their soil and the Muslim living off their land had made them more angry. Perhaps the arrival of reinforcements from Arabia and the possibility of even further additions to the Muslim strength, with the spectre of the siege continuing indefintely, had made

1. Tabari : vol 3, p 201.

them more desperate. Whatever the cause of their change of mood, the Romans came out of their camps, crossed their ditch, drove back the Muslim regiments nearest the ditch and re-established their forward detachments. They were now spoiling for a fight.

Amr returned with the forces which he had detached for dealing with Heliopolis and re-deployed them along the Roman front, facing the Roman outposts. They were back to *status quo ante*. And then, shortly after, the Romans began to sally forth across the ditch and actually attack the Muslims. These sorties gradually increased in scale and strength until they became a daily occurrence. It was obvious that the defenders were trying to break the siege.

The Muslims held their own against these sorties. Every time the Romans crossed the ditch over the crossings and launched their attacks through their bridgeheads, there would be a good deal of hard fighting and then the Muslims would counter attack and push the defenders back. The Romans would fall back to the safety of their side of the ditch. Several times the Muslims followed on and tried to breach the defences but the Romans were too strong in their entrenchments and repulsed all Muslim attacks. So this see-saw battle went on, day after day, with Roman attack and repulse followed by Muslim counter attack and repulse. The Romans lost heavily in these encounters but with their larger numbers they could afford these losses, and the situation remained a stalemate, albeit a lively one.

Then one day Kharija bin Huzafa (one of the four officers who were regarded by Umar as equal to a thousand men) came to Amr and proposed a yet untried stratagem. It would lead to a risky operation but the plan was nevertheless a brilliant one. Amr accepted it and made preparations accordingly.[1]

* * *

The following morning the Romans came forth in great strength. They were getting more desperate with the passage of time and were determined to break the Muslim hold on their city. As they launched their attack, the Muslims fell back, showing signs of dis-

1. According to one account this plan was suggested by a Muslim from the Lakhm, an Arab tribe of Iraq.

tress which delighted the Romans. They did not stop to notice the absence of the dogged resistance which their previous attacks had met from their adversaries, but seeing that victory was in sight and a last they were going to rid their land of the invaders, they pressed on. The Muslims continued to withdraw, with a well-formed, intact front until the Roman Army was in front of the ditch. Then Amr gave the signal.

The next instant 500 horsemen led by Kharija bin Huzafa broke cover and rode out from behind the southern spur of the bare ridge. A fast gallop across the plain and the Muslim regiment was at the ditch, behind the Roman army. Only the Romans standing on the flank saw the oncoming peril but were helpless to do anything about it. In the general mood of exhilaration which had gripped the Roman army, no one would pay heed to counsels of despair. Upon arrival at the ditch, the Muslim cavalry formed into squadrons, covering the crossing sites, and faced the rear of the Roman army Kharija bin Huzafa had got the ditch and now awaited the next signal for action.

The next signal was a thunderous roar of "Allaho Akbar" as the main body of the Muslims attacked the front of the Romans. Knowing that the Romans were cut off from their base and wishing to finish them off once and for all, the Muslims struck with renewed vigour, and the Romans recoiled. Having been sure of victory a moment before, they were taken aback by the about-face of the Muslims. Stunned by the violence and speed of Muslim attack and reeling from Muslim blows, the imperial army began to fall back, though still in fairly good order. Never had the Romans seen such ferocity in the Muslims. But the worst was yet to came; and it came when the regiment of Kharija rammed into the rear of the Roman army.

The plan proposed by Kharija for this battle was a beautiful one, simple in its essentials, daring in its execution. The main idea was to draw the Romans out of the protection of their ditch and bring them to battle in the open. According the Kharija's plan, the Romans would be allowed to advance on the Muslim side of the ditch, the Muslims would fall back to draw the Romans on and away from the ditch, then Kharija with 500 horsemen, suitably concealed

on a flank beforehand, would dash out and come in behind the Romans. The last phase would be an assault by the main body of the army from the front while the cavalry detachment attacked the Romans from behind.

Amr had accepted the plan and acted upon it. During the night a regiment of cavalry under Kharija bin Huzafa was positioned behind the southern spur of the bare ridge[1] and orders given to the rest of the army for the manoeuvre. Before dawn everyone was in the know of the plan and the part that he had to play in the forthcoming battle. And now, as a result of Kharija's plan and Amr's skilful handling of the battle, the imperial army was under attack from front and rear. (See Map 4.)

The fighting became confused as the Romans tried bravely to stem the Muslim advance and at the same time protect their rear from the Muslim cavalry. They were tactically in an impossible position, sandwiched between two forces, and heaps of Roman dead littered the battlefield. Hemmed in from all sides, they were gradually crowded into a tight mass with little room to manoeuvre and hardly able to use their weapons. There was some panic but the officers still had control over the men. In desperation, the Romans attacked the cavalry squadrons of Kharija in order to clear their rear and escape across the ditch. The fighting turned more savage as the Romans repeated their assaults and the Muslim cavalry held on grimly. At last some Roman regiments were able to push the cavalry aside and secure the crossings, and towards these crossings the survivors of other Roman regiments began to rush. They did not stand upon the order of their going.

The Muslim army continued to press from the front and the Romans continued to hasten over the crossing. The movement of the Romans turned into a mad rush as fear lent them wings. Large numbers fell under the last assault of the Muslims, joining the thousands who had already perished in the double Muslim attack before the remnants of the imperial army completed the crossing of the ditch. This time the disorganisation of the Romans gave the Muslims an opportunity to cross the ditch which they had never had

1 The area later became known as the ravine of Bani Wail.

before, and Amr grasped the opportunity with both hands. He threw his regiments across the ditch in the wake of the fleeing Romans. The running fight between Roman and Muslim continued in the space between the fort and the ditch until the last of the Romans had entered the fort and the gate had closed behind him. No living Roman or Copt remained outside the fort except as a prisoner in Muslim hands.

It was a beautifully conceived and superbly conducted battle inviting Roman attack, feigning a withdrawal to draw the Romans away from the protection of their defences, Kharija's dash from a flank to out the Roman line of retreat, a two-pronged attack from front and rear to annihilate the trapped enemy. It had led to a fine and bloody victory, but the victory was not a decisive one. Too many Romans had escaped the trap and stood once again behind the still-unconquered ramparts.

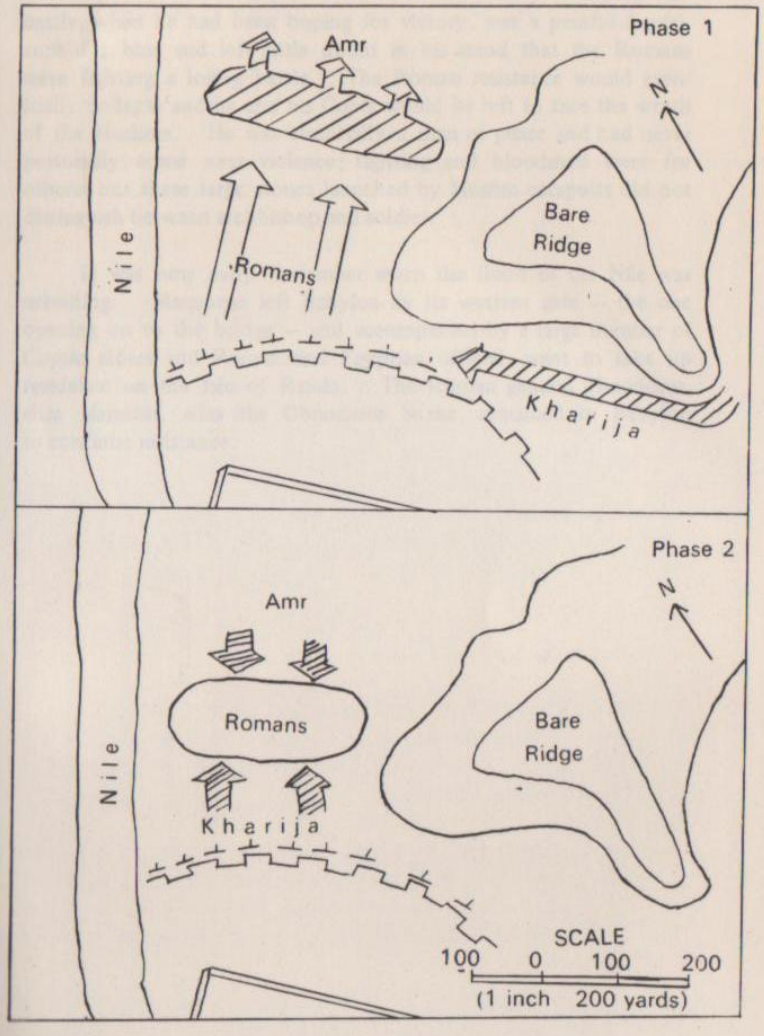
* * *

This was a serious defeat for the Romans and had a depressing effect on those cooped up inside the fort of Babylon. The imperial army had been fought and roundly defeated by the Muslims in open battle, and the thousands, of corpses which littered the battlefield bore evidence of the terrible price paid by the Romans for their venture. And now the attackers had got to the walls of the fort; the depth given to the defence of Babylon by the ditch was also gone. But for the walls of the fort, the Roman defeat would have been complete and decisive; it was only the walls of Babylon which saved the Roman army from annihilation. But so long as the fort remained intact and supplies kept coming across the Nile, the Romans could hold on indefinitely.

The Muslims had not only won a clear victory in the field but had also come up to the wall, Final victory still eluded Amr but he would wait patiently for circumstances to offer a suitable opportunity. Meanwhile he deployed his forces along the whole eastern arc of the fort, from riverbank to riverbank. And to soften up the Romans he had a few catapults constructed and began hurling boulders into Babylon.

This made life even more unpleasant in Babylon; and Maqauqas certainly did not like it. The blow taken by the Romans in

MAP 4 : THE BATTLE OF BABYLON II



battle, when he had been hoping for victory, was a painful experience for him and left little doubt in his mind that the Romans were fighting a losing battle. The Roman resistance would eventually collapse and he and his Copts would be left to face the wrath of the Muslims. He was essentially a man of peace and had never personally come near violence; fighting and bloodshed were for others; but these large stones launched by Muslim catapults did not distinguish between archbishop and soldier.

It was now early November when the flood of the Nile was subsiding. Maqauqas left Babylon by its western gate – the one opening on to the bridge – and accompanied by a large number of Coptic elders and Roman and Egyptian official, went to take up residence on the Isle of Rauda. The Roman general Theodorus, alias Mandfur, alias the Obnoxious Snake, remained in Babylon to continue resistance.

5

The Fall of Babylon

Maqauqas was determined to make peace with the Muslims and avoid further bloodshed. He was not sure of the loyalty and support of his own followers, Greek or Copt, and could not proceed without concensus, but a beginning had to be made. And so, one morning shortly after his arrival on the Isle of Rauda, he sent a number of emissaries to Amr bin Al Aas, with the message:

> You have invaded our land and resolved to fight us. Your stay in our land has become too long.
>
> But you are only a small group and the Romans overshadow you. They are preparing for you with vast numbers and weapons. And the Nile has surrounded you so that you are prisoners in our hands.
>
> Send to us men from among yourselves so that we may hear what they say. Perhaps the matter between us can be settled in a way which you like and we like, and this was ended before the Romans overpower you. Then talk will be of no use.
>
> So send men from among you comrades whom we can tell what we are willing to agree upon.[1]

1. Ibn Abdul Hakam : p 65.

Having sent off the emissaries, Maqauqas sat back to await the Muslim reply. The hours passed. The evening and there was no sign of the Coptic envoys. Maqauqas was deeply worried at their absence and unable to understand why they should take so long.

The night passed, and there was still no sign of the Copts. Maqauqas counted the hours with growing impatience. The sun set on the second day and the Viceroy was beside himself with worry. Fearing for their lives, a sleepless Maqauqas spent the next night keeping a vigil for his faithful emissaries. In the morning they gave him the same message: there was no sign of the Copts he had sent to the Muslim camp.

He turned to some officials who stood behind him and said, "Do you think they kill envoys? Or imprison them? Do you think this is permitted in their religion?"

And then suddenly his envoys turned up. As a matter of fact Amr had deliberately delayed their return for two days and two nights and given them the freedom of the camp so that they could take a good look at the Muslims and form a clear idea of how they lived; and on return they would no doubt pass this on to their comrades. Then he had returned them to Maqauqas; and along with them he sent his own envoys, with the message :–

> There can be nothing between us except one of three conditions:
>
> You enter Islam and become our brothers, and you will have what we have;
>
> Or you pay the Jizya, and you will be subservient to us;
>
> Or we will fight you relentlessly until Allah decides between us, and He is the Best of Judges.[1]

The Jizya was a tax imposed upon non-Muslims in return for a guarantee of protection against their enemies and exemption from

1. *Ibid.*

military service. The amount of Jizya paid was usually a nominal one.

The Muslim envoys delivered the message of their chief, which was in the nature of an ultimatum, and walked away. The Archbishop was saddened by the message; he had hoped for gentler terms or at least a discussion. He turned pensively to his own emissaries who had returned from the Muslim camp and asked them how they had found the Muslims. The Copts replied :–

> We found a people to each of whom death is dearer than life and humility dearer than price. None of them has a desire or greed for this world. Their couch is the earth, they eat sitting upon their heels, and their commander is just like one of them. You cannot tell their high from their low or their masters from their slaves. And when it is time for prayer not a single one holds back, but they wash their limbs and prostrate themselves in prayer.

Upon hearing this Maqauqas exclaimed; "By Him in whose name I swear, if these people were to advance against a mountain they would move it. None is capable of fighting them. And if we are unable to wrest a peace from them today when they are imprisoned by the Nile, they will not respond to us after this day when the earth is open to them and they can come out of their confined position."[1]

The reference to the Muslim confinement by the Nile was to the flood which, rising to its highest level in August-September, restricts movement. More will be said about this flood in a later chapter.

Maqauqas made one more request for envoys with whom he could discuss terms. This time Amr, feeling that sufficient time had been allowed for the impact of what the Egyptian emissaries had seen in the Muslim camp, sent a delegation of ten men led by Ubada bin As-Samit, the equal of thousand.

* * *

1. *Ibid.*

We are told that each of the ten Muslims selected by Amr was ten handspans tall.[1] This must be an exaggeration, because taking an average handspan to be 8 or 9 inches, these men must have been about 7 feet tall, give or take a few inches. We can be sure, however, that they were all very tall, picked by Amr for their imposing appearance, and among these tall men Ubada bin As-Samit was the tallest. He was big and black. He was not a Negro; he was just black.

But Ubada was a fine man. He was a Muslim of high standing – noble, true, devout – and was held in esteem by the Muslims for his saintly qualities as well as his intelligence and wisdom. He was an Ansar, i.e. an inhabitant of Madina. In fact, he was one of the twelve men of Madina who had first met and invited Prophet Muhammad to come and make Madina his home at a time when the infidels of Mecca had made life intolerable for him. And Ubada had the distinction of having fought at Badr, the first battle of Islam.

His frightening exterior belied the man within, though not his strength and prowess as a fighter. One day, during the confrontation at Babylon and before the battle outside the ditch, Ubada had been saying his prayers at some distance from the ditch, ahead of the Muslim camp, with his horse standing near him, when a party of Roman soldiers came forward towards him. They wore their armour and various fineries with which the imperial soldiers adorned themselves. As they drew near, Ubada broke off his prayers, leapt on to his horse and charged at them. The sight of the black giant coming at them ferociously, frightened the wits out of the Roman horsemen and they turned and bolted. As Ubada came in hot pursuit, the Romans began to drop various items of their fine equipment in the hope that he would stop to pick them up and thus give them time to get away. Ubada ignored these objects and pressed after them. However, the Roman soldiers got back safely to their side of the ditch from where they began pelting him with stones. Ubada turned back, and ignoring all the precious objects dropped by the Romans, returned to his place and resumed his prayers. The Romans followed quietly, picked up their possessions, and as quietly slipped back to their fort.[2]

1. *Ibid:* p 66.
2. *Ibid:* p 62.

This was the man, the equal of a thousand, sent by Amr bin Al Aas as head of the Muslim delegation to hold talks with Maqauqas. Amr instructed him to accept nothing from the Egyptians but one of the three usual conditions – Islam, the Jizya or the sword.

* * *

The Muslim delegates entered the presence of Maqauqas, led by Ubada. The sight of Ubada had a terrible effect on Maqauqas. Thoroughly frightened, he blurted out: "Take this black one away from me and let another come forward to speak with me."

The comrades of Ubada replied, "This black one is the first among us in wisdom and knowledge. He is the best of us and he is our leader. We will act according to his opinion and his words. Our commander has given him instructions and ordered us not to dispute his judgement or his words."

"But how did you agree to this black one being your leader?" Maqauqas asked the delegates. "He should not be one of you".

"Nay, even if he is black, as you see," replied the delegates. "He is the best of us in position and in faith and in judgement and wisdom. Among us there is nothing wrong with being black".

Maqauqas then turned to Ubada, reluctantly, and said, "Then advance, O black one, but speak with me gently, for I fear your blackness. If your speech be harsh, my fright will increase."

Ubada advanced towards the Patriarch, stopped a few paces from him, and began: "I have heard what you said. Lo, among the comrades I have left behind there are a thousand black ones who are blacker and more fearsome to look at than I. If you could see them you would be more afraid of them than you are of me. My youth is passed, but even so – praise be to Allah – I can strike fear in a hundred of the enemy if they advance upon me all together. And the same goes for my comrades.

"This is so because our zeal and steadfastness in the holy war are for Allah and in seeking His pleasure. Our war against our enemies, who fight Allah, is not for the things of this world or for

an increase in wealth, except that Allah has made lawful for us whatever we take in battle. It matters not whether one of us possesses a heap of gold or nothing more than one dirham; the limit of his need is food to appease his hunger and a cloak to wrap himself.

"So have we been ordered by our Lord and by our Prophet."

When Ubada had finished speaking, Maqauqas turned to his officials and priests and said, "Have you ever heard such words as this man has spoken? I had feared his appearance, but his words frighten me even more than his looks. Surely God has sent him and his comrades for the destruction of the earth. I see their power overwhelming the entire world."

Maqauqas then turned to Ubada: "O virtuous man, I have heard what you had to say. By my faith, you have got where you have got and gained your victories over your enemies only because of their love of this world. But from the nations of Rome are coming to fight you numbers that cannot be counted, men known for their courage and strength.

"We know that you cannot fight them because of your paucity of numbers. You have stood against us for some months and you are in a distressing situation. We are inclined to be kind to you because of your weakness and poverty, and we would be glad to make peace with you.

"We will give each one of you two dinars, and to your commander a hundred dinars, and to your Caliph a thousand dinars. Take them and go back to your land, before you are overwhelmed by a force which you do not have the strength to oppose."

The Egyptians were making the same mistake as had been made by the Romans and the Persians before them, of regarding these Arabs as the Arabs of the Ignorance, which was the name by which the pre-Islamic era in Arabia was known. Then the Arabians had been a wretched people, known for their discord, their backwardness and their poverty. But the Ignorance was over, its darkness banished by the bright light of Islam. And these Arabs who went to fight the holy war beyond their desert frontiers were a new breed

of men, strengthened and purified by the new faith. They had shed their sloth and their vices and acquired a new set of values from the word of God and the teachings of Muhammad, the last Apostle of God to mankind. These men regarded it as their bounden duty to carry the torch of Islam to every corner of the earth. They were not men who could be frightened or bought with gold.

Ubada remained unmoved. "O you," he said, showing scant respect for the Viceroy of Egypt, "do not deceive yourself and your comrades. As for what you say about the multitude of the Romans and our inability to fight them, you do not frighten us with these things. If what you say be true, then by Allah, it makes us even more eager to fight them. For if we are killed in battle to the last man, that would be our greatest offering to our Lord when we go before Him to seek His pleasure and His paradise.

"We have the choice of two blessings: the wealth of this world if we defeat you and the wealth of the Hereafter if you defeat us. God has said to us in His book: 'How many a small band has overpowered a large band by Allah's will; and Lo, Allah is with the steadfast'.[1]

"There is not a single one among us but prays to his Lord morning and evening to grant him martyrdom and not to return him to his home and his family and his children. And there is not a single one among us who has not bequeathed his family and his children to his Lord".

Ubada then again offered the three alternatives: Islam, the Jizya or the sword. Maqauqas asked if there was a fourth one, and Ubada swore that there was not.

Maqauqas turned to his comrades – the officials and leaders who stood beside him. "They have finsihed," he addressed them. "Now what do you think about it?"

"Could anyone agree to this disgrace"? they answered. "As for what they say about our entering their faith, it can never be

1. A well-known Quranic verse.

that we abandon the faith of Jesus, son of Mary, and enter another faith which we do not know. And as for what they say about turning us into slaves, death would be easier than that. It would be better for us if they would accept payment from us, even double of what you offered last time".

Maqauqas repeated his offer of gold dinars to Ubada, this time doubling the sum. The offer was disdainfully rejected.

Maqauqas then made one more attempt to talk his comrades into accepting Muslim terms. "Take my advice," he said, "and accept one of the three conditions of the enemy. By God, you do not have the power to resist them. If you do not accept their conditions willingly now you will shortly have to accept worse conditions unwillingly."

"Which of their conditions should we accept?" they asked.

Maqauqas replied, "As for entering their religion, I do not recommend it to you. As for fighting them, I know that you are not capable of doing so and cannot match their steadfastness. That leaves the third, from which you cannot escape".

This was the Jizya, which involved being subservient to the Muslim power – a subservience of which the Copts were taking an exaggerated view, that it was tantamount to slavery which in fact it was not.

"Are we to be their slaves for ever?" the Egyptians asked.

"Yes," replied the Patriarch. "To be their slaves but masters of your land, safe in your persons and your goods and your families is better for you than to die to the last man or become slaves who can be bought and sold anywhere in the land – you and your wives and your children."

The Egyptians were adamant in their refusal. "Death would be easier for us," they asserted.

There was nothing more to be said. The two sides had agreed to nothing. The gulf between them remained as wide as before.

The Muslim envoys, led by Ubada bin As-Samit, left the Isle of Rauda. Soon after their departure the bridge which connected the island with Babylon was dismantled. Hereafter passage between the two banks of the river would be by boat.[1]

* * *

Amr was not convinced that he had seen the last of the talks. After the failure of the meeting on the Isle of Rauda, he felt that one more effort should be made at persuading the Romans and the Copts to give in to Muslim demands. That would also solve the problem of having to capture a virtually unassailable fortress. With this in view, he asked for a personal meeting with the Roman commander at Babylon – Augustus, the Obnoxious Snake – and a time was fixed for Amr to go into the fort and meet the Roman general at his headquarters. This visit to the fort would also enable the Muslim commander to see for himself the mood of the Roman commander and his officers.

Amr went in with a few Muslims. We do not know what was said and heard at the meeting. The Muslim stand was a rigid one – 3 conditions – and that did not allow any flexibility in bargaining, but knowing Amr, he would probably use his eloquence or try to frighten his opponent with the dire consequences of further resistance to the Muslims. His efforts, however, did not meet with success. He got up to go, and said to Theodorus, "I will go and take counsel with my officers."

Unknown to Amr, the Roman general had sent orders to the commander of the guard at the gate through which Amr entered and would depart, that when the Muslim general passed through the gate on his way out, he should throw a large boulder on top of him from the roof of the gate and kill him. By killing the Muslim Commander-in-Chief, the Obnoxious Snake–obviously well named–hoped to weaken the resolve of the Muslim army and reduce its effectiveness in battle; and in this he was undoubtedly right. As his parting words, he said to Amr: "You have entered. Now see how you get out".

He was a fool to say this, and to a man like Amr who was known as the shrewdest of the Qureish and who openly boasted

1. This discussion is taken from Ibn Abdul Hakam: pp 65–69 and Suyuti: pp 110 – 114.

about his being undeceivable. Amr had gone only a few steps when it flashed across his mind that he would be killed on his way out. It would be a heinous act–the killing of a helpless opposing commander in your own camp when he has come for talks with your agreement, but it was obviously going to be done. Amr turned back to Theodorus and with a look of perfect innocence, said, "I would like to bring some of my colleagues to hear from you what I have heard."[1]

Theodorus took the bait. The thought of laying his hands on the Muslim commander along with many of his generals and having the whole lot killed without the risk of battle seemed marvellous to his perfidious mind. It was obviously much better than killing just the Chief. If more Muslim generals would willingly step into his trap, they were welcome. Theodorus agreed with Amr's suggestions, and quietly gave orders to his staff to tell the guard at the gate to let the Muslims pass unharmed. He acted like a fool for the second time in a few minutes.

Amr bin Al Aas got out safe and sound, and knew that he would never enter the fort of Babylon again except as a victor. The interlude for talks was over; the issue would have to be settled by the sword.

* * *

The talks with Maqauqas took place some time in the early part of November. We know this roughly from the seasonal flood of the Nile and the timing of earlier events. The visit of Amr bin Al Aas, following the failure of these talks, would be about the middle of the month. After that there was a stalemate. There was no opening in the Roman defence of Babylon, no relaxation of vigilance on any part of the fort, no opportunity which the Muslims could exploit. The Romans would not come out to fight; the Muslims could not get in to fight. And so several weeks passed. The Muslims continued to pound the city with their catapults, as a result of which the Romans and Copts living in Babylon were sorely tried, but the pounding led to no tactical result.

Amr and Zubeir searched their brains for a solution to the problem. Several times they carried out reconnaissances of the

1. Ibn Abdul Hakam: p 62.

battlements but failed to find an opening. Then, finally, one day towards the end of Zul Haj (about mid-December), while examining the wall of the fort, Zubeir found the place he was looking for. This was the small south-western face of the south-western extension of the fort, close to the river bank. (Later, upon the construction of Fustat, this place would become known as Dar Abi Saleh al Harrani, next to the Hammam of Abu Nasr As-Siraj.)

There was a gate here, known as the Gate of Iron, flanked by two towers, and at the time of Zubeir's reconnaissance there was no guard at this gate, no picquets on the towers. Since all the fighting up till now had taken place on the northern and north-eastern sides of the fort and no Muslim movement had been made on the southern side, the Romans had, understandably, begun to neglect this side.

The place offered possibilities, and the more Zubeir examined it the more he felt that this was the spot they had been looking for all the time. It took no time to convince Amr of the suitability of the place for assault. Plans were made, orders given, troops earmarked and prepared for their various roles. Zubeir would lead the storming party himself, using a ladder to scale the wall. He said, "I bequeath my life to Allah. Whoever wishes to follow me can follow me." Many soldiers volunteered to join the storming party, and from them Zubeir chose a group which would follow him up the ladder and into the fort.

Another spot was chosen a little to the right of Zubeir's, and here another storming party under Shurahbeel bin Hujayya Al Muradi would make a similar attempt. This place was near the future Zuqaq Al Zamamire – Lane of Flute-Players.[1]

The plan was that the two leaders would climb their ladders to the top of the wall, a few others would follow them, those on top would give the call of "Allaho Akbar", yet others would then go up the ladders. Meanwhile the main body of the army would lie in wait near the gate, ready to rush in as soon as the gate was opened

1. It is not possible to locate this spot accurately. It could only have been a bit to the right of the Gate of Iron around the corner of the wall, where there was another gate flanked by a tower.

from inside. The night of Zul Haj 30, 19 Hijri, was chosen for the assault (December 20, 640). It was a moonless night.

There was no movement from the Muslim camp until it got dark; then everyone moved to his assigned place. When all was ready Zubeir and Shurahbeel moved forward with a few soldiers, each group carrying a ladder. It was now quite late at night, and there was no sign of life on the battlements. The ladders were placed against the wall at the two chosen spots and the two leaders climbed up to the top of the wall. There was nobody on top. Some signal was given, whereupon other soldiers began to climb up the ladder, in single file. When a few men had collected on top, Zubeir gave the rousing call of Allaho Akbar.

The great battle cry of Islam was taken up by the entire army and thundered from thousands of Muslim throats. At the same time soldiers awaiting their turn began to rush up the ladders, and the crowd on Zubeir's ladder became so large that there was a danger of the ladder breaking. Amr bin Al Aas was present at this spot and stopped the men from crowding the ladder. Thereafter he himself controlled the flow of traffic up the ladder. Meanwhile, Zubeir and his comrades had moved down to the ground inside and made rapidly for the gate, where a few sentries who opposed them were soon despatched to hell. Zubeir broke the lock and chain that held the gate, and the gate was flung wide open. The next instant the Muslim regiments waiting outside poured into the fort with drawn swords.

When the cry of *Allah is Great* was taken up by the Muslims, most of the Romans and Copts believed that the attackers had got inside the fort and this led to a considerable amount of panic. Some units of the imperial army made a stand against the Muslims but their resistance was soon overcome. The bulk of the imperial army was impelled by fear towards the river bank with the sole purpose of getting away from the onrushing Muslims. Theodorus and his staff were the first to reach the bank and getting into boats already positioned for them, crossed to the Isle of Rauda, from where, later, Theodorus fled to Alexandria. Other boats were used by other fugitives, and a ferry system was established to evacuate as much of the Roman army as possible. Through the night scores of boats plied back and forth across the Nile.

Within the fort large numbers of Romans were slaughtered by the Muslims and even larger numbers taken captive. Actual casualty figures are not known, for either side. It was some time in the morning that the Muslims, having cleared the centre of Babylon, arrived at the river bank to find it covered by milling crowds waiting for a boat to take them to safety. All were taken captive. Amr wanted to pursue the fugitive soldiers and finish them off before they could recover their breath and their courage, but there were no boats on the bank and the flood was still at a considerable height. In fact the Muslims felt as though they were surrounded by water. This was as far as they could go.

The Battle of Babylon was over. The morning of the victory was Muharram 1, 20 Hijri (December 21, 640).[1] At the end of the battle the strength of the Muslim army was 12,300. They buried their martyrs at the foot of the wall of the fort.

It only remains to mention, in the account of this battle, an altercation which took place between Zubeir and Shurahbeel – the other man to lead the assault besides Zubeir. Shurahbeel had played a less important role in the storming of the fort and even if he had not been there, the fort would have been taken as a result of Zubeir's efforts. But there was some unpleasantness between the two after the assault, and Shurahbeel complained about this to Amr.

Although Amr was the commander of the Muslim forces in Egypt and Zubeir served, at least technically, under him, he was not about to take liberties with Zubeir who had a much higher place as a Muslim and a Companion. He was tough too. So Amr refused to burn his fingers and threw the problem back at Shurahbeel by saying: "Take over command from him if you wish."

It appears that Shurahbeel did nothing further in the matter, no doubt sharing Amr's opinion that Zubeir was not a man to be

1. The day of victory is known and the duration of the siege is known (7 months). We also know the time of the talks from the state of the flood and the fact that Amr fought for 2 months at Babylon before asking Caliph Umar for help. The remaining dates in this and the two preceding chapters are the result of calculation.

crossed. But later Amr mentioned to Zubeir in a casual manner the complaint of Shurahbeel and what he (Amr) had said to him (Shurahbeel) about taking over command from him (Zubeir). Thereupon Zubeir exploded: "Is this worm from the worms of the Yaman going to take over command from me?"[1]

* * *

The very next day Maqauqas sued for peace and asked to see the Muslim commander. When Amr mentioned this to his officers he found that they were all averse to peace, because having more or less broken the Roman power in this region, they would gain more in the way of booty and slaves if the state of war continued. Amr had to fall back upon the orders of the Caliph regarding acceptance of peace on the offer of the Jizya, before his companions reluctantly agreed to peace.

Amr and Maqauqas met soon after this in Babylon and decided the terms of surrender. A treaty was drawn up and signed by the two leaders. Its terms were:–

a. The treaty would apply to all Egypt; the entire country would submit to the Muslim power.

b. All adult male Copts would pay the Jizya at 2 gold dinars per head per annum. There would be no tax on the very old, on women and on minors.

c. All the land and the goods in the hands of the Copts would remain with them.

d. Whenever Muslims stopped at a town or village of Copts, while journeying between cities and camps, they would enjoy the hospitality of the local inhabitants for three days.

e. No Copts would be taken as captives; i.e. no slavery for the Copts.

f. The Romans could elect to accept these terms and would then be permitted to remain in Egypt. Those who did not accept the terms were free to depart. The decision

1. Ibn Abdul Hakam: p 64.

in their case would pend while Maqauqas wrote to Emperor Heraclius and obtained his agreement.

The treaty also laid down the rate of revenue to be paid by landowners and some provisions like wheat, oil, etc, which the Coptic population was required to supply for use by the Muslims. Altogether the adult male Coptic population of Egypt upon which the Jizya was imposed was 6 million, giving the Muslims an annual income from the Jizya alone of 12 million dinars.

The treaty was written by Amr's slave, Werdan – a Greek who had been captured in Palestine and was now a devout Muslim with the Arab name of Abu Ubeid; and was witnessed by Zubeir and Amr's two sons: Abdullah and Muhammad.

With the signing of the treaty all Egypt came under Muslim control, unless Heraclius should choose to repudiate the agreement made by his viceroy. In that case the Muslims would find themselves in possession only of the city complex of Memphis and the area stretching north-east of it to Farma and Areesh; if they wanted more of Egypt they would have to fight for it.

Within Babylon itself there was an immediate return to peace. The gates were opened, the Muslims could go in and the Romans could come out. This led to a certain degree of fraternisation between the two sides, as usually happens at the end of a war, and the Romans invited a Muslim delegation to dinner. Amr took about a dozen Muslims with him, picking the more well-bred ones and seeing that they were finely dressed, and went into the fort.

It was a superb dinner and they ate well. When the meal was over Amr asked his hosts how much they had spent on it, and they gave the amount expended as 20,000 dinars. Appalled at such extravagance, Amr declared, "We do not need such food. After this time give us 20,000 dinars."

The next day Amr wished to return their hospitality and invited a delegation of Romans to dinner in the Muslim camp. According to Amr's orders the only dish to be served at the party was a kind of thick stew or broth with chunks of bread and hunks of meat.

A few Arab soldiers, simply dressed, would sit interspersed among the Romans and share the meal with them. The soldiers picked for the purpose were the real simple, rough Bedouins.

The Roman delegation came with pomp and ceremony. Knowing the ways of the Arabs, they brought their own chairs with brocade-covered seats. They were placed around the dishes in a circle with an equal number of Arabs, an Arab between every two Romans but sitting on the ground. As the meal began, the Arabs started eating with gusto, quite unceremoniously, taking big chunks of meat from the pots with their hands, tearing the meat with their teeth and spattering the Romans with the broth.

Whether this was a natural performance or a put-up show we do not know, but the Romans found it most distasteful. They turned to Amr: "Where are those who came to eat with us earlier?"

Amr replied: "They were men of counsel. These are men of war."[1]

1. *Ibid:* p 60.

6

The Copts of Egypt

Egypt was inhabited by many races and many nations: Copts, Berbers, Greeks, Romans, Nubians and others. They had all come to Egypt, either in the course of war or with peaceful intent, loved the fair face of the land and settled down. This fondness for Egypt on the part of visitors and travellers dates back to the time of Prophet Joseph, who was brought to Egypt by a trade caravan and sold as a slave in Heliopolis. The poor boy – lonely, friendless, homesick – raised his hands in supplication. "O Lord." he prayed, "I am a stranger in this land. Make it dear to me, and to every stranger."[1] God accepted his prayer and thereafter, apparently, every visitor to Egypt has loved the land and wished to make it his own.

But although inhabited by people of many races, a vast majority of Egyptians was Copts. Others had come and settled down but the Copts had always been there, so far as anyone could remember. The name itself was derived from the Greek *Aiguptios*, which means, simply, Egyptian, and was first rendered as Kibt, before being changed to Copt. They were the true, the real Egyptians; and Prophet Muhammad had a soft spot for them. He had once said to his Companions, "When you conquer Egypt, be good to the Copts, for they are relations and in-laws."[2]

1. Suyuti: p 22.
2. Ibn Abdul Hakam; p 2; Suyuti: p 11.

This reference to the Copts as in-laws was not due merely to the gift of the Coptic girl, Maria, by Maqauqas to the Holy Prophet. The tradition of Semitic people having the Egyptians as in-laws and relations went much farther back in time – in fact, to Prophet Abraham, father of the Semitic prophets.

When Abraham entered Egypt, he was accompanied by his wife Sarah – a strikingly beautiful woman who was said to have the beauty of Eve. They had hardly got into Egypt when the Pharaoh of the time was informed by his agents that a man had entered his domain with a woman so beautiful that only he (Pharoah) had the right to possess her. The monarch, apparently a bit of a lad, was intrigued by the possibilities.

Abraham was duly sent for. On his way to the palace he was conscious of the danger of his being killed by the Pharaoh so that he could take possession of Sarah, and told her that if asked, he would say that she was his sister. And that is just what happened. In reply to a query from the Pharaoh, he told him that Sarah was his sister. The Pharaoh felt free to take her as his own and extended his hand towards her (according to the Old Testament, he did much more than extend his hand) but at that moment God caused his hand to dry up. One look at his dried-up hand was enough to convince him that he had done wrong and that Abraham was no ordinary man – not the kind of man whose woman you could fool around with. He begged Abraham to pray to God to forgive him. Abraham so prayed, and God restored the hand of the Pharaoh to its normal condition.

To make amends as well as to show his thanks to Abraham for having got his hand back to normal, the Pharaoh presented Sarah with a maid-servant. This was Hager (or Hajira), a girl from either Farma or Babylon.[1] Later Sarah, who at the time had no children, offered Hager to Abraham for his pleasure, and Hager became the mother of Ismail, who is the father of the Arab race. So it was with the Patriarch Abraham that the Arabs' relationship with the Copts began and the Copts became their in-laws.

1. Suyuti: pp 13-14.

Then there was Joseph, the beautiful one, in love of whom Potiphar's wife (named Zuleikha in the Quran) made a fool of herself. This actually happened in Heliopolis. Joseph had been brought to Egypt as a boy and sold into slavery, but rose to become what would now be equivalent to Prime Minister. He ran Egypt for the Pharaoh for many decades. He built Fayyum, laid out an extensive canal system in the country, and was the first man to carry out measurements of the water of the Nile. He placed a regulator at Memphis.

When he was dying as a very old man, Joseph said to his people "You will be driven out of Egypt to the land of your fathers. When that happens, take my bones with you."[1]

Then he died, and according to legend, they buried him on one side of the Nile. That side became very green and the other bank of the Nile went dry. So they shifted his bones to the other side of the Nile and that side turned green while this side went dry. Then they put his bones in an iron casket, built two strong iron pillars, one on each bank of the river connected the pillars with an iron chain and suspended the casket in the middle of the river by the chain. Then both sides of the Nile turned green and remained so.[2] Such is the legend of his burial; and Allah knows best!

Joseph too established a relationship with the Copts by marrying a Coptic lady, daughter of the lord of Heliopolis. He also got his father, Jacob, and the entire family over to Egypt and they settled down in the land with him. Then their group consisted of 70 souls, but the descendents of these Israelites who fled Egypt under Prophet Moses numbered 600,000. The Pharaoh who chased Moses out of Egypt was Ramses II (13th Century B.C.) who ruled the country for 67 years and claimed a great victory over the Hittites at Kadesh, which actually he never won, and was finally drowned while in pursuit of the Israelites.[3]

According to another legend, after the death by drowning of the Pharoah and his nobles and officers there was no one left to

1. Ibn Abdul Hakam: p 18.
2. *Ibid:* pp 18-19.
3. According to some, the Pharaoh of Moses was the son of Ramses II.

rule over Egypt, just women and children and slaves. So the women chose an old and wise woman named Daluka, who was from the royal family, to rule over them. Apparently she did the job very well and ensured the defence of Egypt by building a great wall around the land, which came to be known as "the Wall of the Old Woman." But the women missed men, as inevitably happens in an exclusively female society, and eventually it was decided by general consensus that they should marry their slaves. Before marriage the slaves, who were Copts, of course, were made to promise that after they became the husbands of their ladies, they would not do anything without the wife's permission.

The Coptic slaves became free, married their mistresses and kept their word. So did their descendents, at least for two thousand years, so that it came to be known that whenever an Egyptian had to take an important decision, he would first consult his wife.[1]

* * *

Christianity came to Egypt early in the Christian era. In fact, Jesus himself was brought to Egypt as an infant to escape the wrath of King Herod, and lived at Babylon with his mother for some time until it was safe for him to return to Palestine. But the faith was not introduced to the land till the latter half of the 1st Century AD, and then it spread quite fast.

Christianity in Egypt was nearly three hundred years old when the Roman Empire turned Christian; and that happened when Constantine, the 4th Century Emperor who shifted the imperial capital from Rome to Byzantium (Constantinople – Istanbul), declared Christianity to be the state religion. As various nations in the empire took to Christianity, they brought their own characteristic intellectual discipline, mystical traditions and spiritual capacity. The Orientals and Africans were more mystically inclined.

It was not long before religious disputes broke out among the nations of the empire, the first one starting early in the 4th Century. And the main point of the dispute was not any matter of substance or any important moral or practical issue which affected the lives

1. Ibn Abdul Hakam: p 28.

of the Chrisitians, but a purely academic one regarding the person of Christ – his humanity and divinity. Was Christ a man? Was he God? Was he both? This also affected the position of his mother, the Virgin Mary. Was she mother of God or of a man? And in this futile controversy curses were hurled by Chrisitians at each other, anathemas read, people tortured and slaughtered and whole communities drummed out of Christendom and driven to revolt. This became known as the Monophysite Controversy.

The dispute first came into the open early in the 4th Century and was known as Arianism. Attributed to Arius of Alexandria, it dealt with the nature of the Trinity and took the stand that Jesus was a creature, i.e. a man, and only semi-divine. The doctrine became official at the Council of Nicaea held by Constantine in 325, but the dispute remained unsettled. The storm of the controversy lashed the Christian world for a hundered years, until the appearance of Nestorius, when the storm became even more violent. Nestorius was a man of Persian descent born in Syria, who became Bishop of Constantinople. He was merciless in suppressing disagreement – heresy, he called it – but in the end himself got trapped in the net of the controversy. He was believed to hold the view that Mary was not the mother of God, and that Christ had two natures, one human and the other divine.

The supporters of Nestorius explained that he did not really mean that; that what he meant was that Jesus was the son of God and therefore divine. But he manifested as a man and thus used his humanity as a form through which to express himself. His humanity became part of his nature which was essentially one. This was all a matter of abstract intellectual speculation, having no bearing whatever on the basic beliefs of Christianity or the teachings of Christ, but everybody got worked up and Nestorius was attacked from pulpit and platform, the attack being led by Cyril, Bishop of Alexandria (412 – 444).

At the Council of Ephesus, which was convened in 431 to solve the problem, the split became worse. Cyril deposed Nestorius; then Nestorius deposed Cyril; then Cyril redeposed Nestorius; and so this tragi-comic drama rolled on, with results which were hardly beneficial to the peace and unity of Christendom. Some where along the line another heresy entered the dispute, known as the Jacobite

heresy, but we will not bother the reader with further details of the rise and fall of this controversy, in which bishops and priests scrapped and fought like *Mullahs* and got nowhere.

The basic points of this dispute have been briefly mentioned here because it had a powerful impact on the Copts and on Egypt – an impact which indirectly facilitated the Muslim conquest which this book is about. The Egyptian Christians, being more spiritual and more mystical, stuck to the belief in the purely divine nature of Jesus and abhorred the attempts of the Roman and Greek intellectuals to present him as purely human or as a bit of both. The Copts were part of the Jacobite Church. And when Heraclius, the Roman Emperor at the time of the Muslim conquest, tried to unite Christendom by introducing a new, all-embracing, coordinated doctrine known officially as the Melkite Church, the rift between Rome and Egypt got wider. Things went from bad to worse as Heraclius actually forbade the practice of the Coptic form of worship and let loose a reign of terror against the Coptic priesthood.

So the Copts of Egypt put up no great resistance to the army of Islam which invaded their land. It could not, they thought, be worse than the Melkite Church! Actually they found the terms offered by the Muslim power, i.e. Jizya at two dinars per annum in return for peace, protection and complete freedom of religious worship and practice, a far more benevolent condition than what they had suffered for three hundred years at the hands of not the Christianity of Jesus (on whom be peace), but the Roman and Greek interpretation and practice of that Christianity. So they welcomed the soldiers of Islam as deliverers.

* * *

When he made peace with Amr bin Al Aas, Maqauqas included in that peace the Romans and Greeks living in Egypt, mainly in and around Alexandria. They could continue to live in peace in the country so long as they paid two dinars a year as Jizya to the Muslim state. But the terms agreed to by the Patriarch were not binding upon the Romans as they were upon the Copts, of whom Maqauqas was spiritual and temporal head. So a proviso was made in the treaty that its applicability to the Romans would be deferred until a decision on the matter had been taken by the

Emperor. And Maqauqas wrote to the Emperor, informing him of what had happened and what he had done and why he had done it.

The Emperor's reaction was angry, violent, almost abusive. "Only 12,000 Arabs came to you." Heraclius wrote contemptuously to his viceroy, "and in Egypt there are more Copts than can be counted. And if the Copts did not wish to fight but instead opted to pay Jizya to the Arabs and preferred them to us, you had with you in Egypt, from the Romans in Alexandria and those who are with you, more than a hundred thousand men with weapons and strength, while the Arabs are in a week condition, as you can see.

"You despaired of fighting them and agreed, for yourself and the Romans, to be debased like the Copts".

Then came the Emperor's categorical command: "Fight them, you and those of the Romans who are with you, until you either die or conquer over them. With your numbers and strength and their fewness and weakness, they are just a morsel for you. So urge the people to fight, and let no other resolution but this enter your mind."[1]

Heraclius also wrote to his Roman generals, disowning the treaty made by Maqauqas, and ordered them to continue resistance to the Muslims. His letters to the Romans were no secret, of course, and the fact of his writing them was not concealed from the Patriarch, nor were their contents unknown to him. Since the letters of the Emperor demanded action and the Romans in Babylon and Memphis would expect action on his part, which he had no intention of taking, he invited the Roman leaders – the generals and other officers of the army – to a conference.

When the Romans had assembled, Maqauqas addressed them: "By God, in their fewness and weakness they are stronger and harder than us, in spite of our numbers and strength. A single one of them is equal to a hundred of us. That is so because they are a people to whom death is dearer than life. If a man of theirs

1. Ibn Abdul Hakam: p 71; Suyuti: pp 116-7.

is killed he wants to be killed and does not wish to return to his home and his family and his children.

"They believe that they will get a big reward for those of us they kill. And they say that if they are killed they will enter heaven; and they have no desire for this world beyond what they need of food and clothing to keep themselves alive.

"We are a people who fear death and love the joys of this world. How can we be equal to them? How can we stand up to them?

"Know, O Romans, that I am not breaking the treaty which I have entered into with the Arabs. And I know that tomorrow you will be like me in thought and speech and will wish you had obeyed me. That is so because I have pondered, judged and know, while the Emperor has not pondered, judged or known.

"Woe to you! Does not any one of you wish to live his life in peace with his goods and his children by paying two dinars a year?"[1]

None of the Roman officers was prepared to submit to Muslim terms against the orders of the Roman Emperor, and the conference broke up. The Romans went away. Maqauqas was left alone with his thoughts and felt deeply grieved at the unkind words of Heraclius. He had done all that any viceroy could do for the defence of Babylon, and if the city was no longer in Roman or Egyptian hands it was due to no fault of his own. And for Heraclius to write in this vein was hardly fair because he himself had been decisively beaten by the Muslims in battle after battle and finally driven out of the fair province of Syria, which he now dared not re-enter.

As a general, Maqauqas would have been a disgrace to any army. It is not for a general to publicise his fears, to magnify the quality and capability of the enemy in front of his own officers and men, while belittling their own military effectiveness. A general

1. *Ibid.*

must do the opposite. But Maqauqas was not a general. He was a priest; and he was a Copt. Nursing his wounded feelings, he went to Amr and complained about Heraclius.

"The Emperor has disapproved of what I have done and has rejected it," he said to Amr. "He has written to me and to the Romans that we should not agree to peace with you. He has ordered them to go on fighting you until they conquer over you or you conquer over them.

"I shall not break the treaty which I have entered into and sworn to with you, but my authority is limited to myself and to those who follow me. Your pact with the Copts is complete and you will not find a breach of trust on their part. I guarantee to you for myself, and the Copts guarantee to you for themselves the pact which they have made with you.

"As for the Romans, I am no longer responsible to them. And I ask you for three favours."

"And what are they?" asked Amr.

"Firstly, do not break your treaty with the Copts. Regard me as one of them, for they and I are of the same mind about the treaty. They are anxious to honour the treaty as you expect.

"Secondly," the Patriarch continued, "should the Romans ask you for peace after today, do not make peace with them but treat them as captives and slaves, for that is what they deserve. I gave them good advice and they spurned it; I guided them correctly and they blamed me.

"Thirdly, when I am dead, tell them to bury me in the Church of Abu Yuhannas in Alexandria."[1]

Amr was very kind in dealing with Maqauqas and agreed to all three requests. In return, he put forward some proposals of his own which the Patriarch accepted. These proposals were:—

1. Church of Saint John.

The Copts would hand over intact the two bridges which connected the right bank of the Nile with the left, with the Isle of Rauda as the connecting link between the two bridges. (One of these bridges had been dismantled).

The Copts would arrange camps and open markets for the Muslims on the march.

The Copts would build bridges for the Muslims as required between Babylon and Alexandria.[1]

The Holy Prophet had said: "Be good to the Copts, for lo, you will find them the best of helpers in your fight against your enemies."[2] His prophecy was about to come true.

1. Ibn Abdul Hakam: pp 71-2; Balazuri: p 217.
2. Ibn Abdul Hakam: p 3, Suyuti: p 12.

7

The Advance to Alexandria

Heraclius, Emperor of Byzantium, was now an old man. He was also an embittered man, thanks to the Muslims. Fortune, which had once smiled upon him, had lately forsaken him but he had basked in its kindly light long enough to earn the respect of the historian as one of the great emperors of Rome.

Though not born to the purple, Heraclius was nevertheless noble born. His father had been Viceroy (Exarch) of Africa, which meant North Africa, west of Egypt. He came to the throne in 610 AD when the affairs of the Eastern Roman Empire were at a very low ebb, when the empire consisted of little more than the area around Constantinople and parts of Greece and Africa, and when the enemies of the empire, bent upon its total annihilation, were knocking at the gates of the capital. The empire had known bad days in its long and tumultuous history, but none worse than these.

Soon after his coronation, young Heraclius almost gave up and wished to return to Africa, regarding the task of saving the empire as a hopeless one. But he was persuaded to stay, and subsequently not only saved the empire but restored it to the heights of glory which it had known in better periods of its history. In a campaign spread over two decades, he defeated the barbarians of the north – the Avars, the Slavs, the Bulgars and other allied

marauders – and finally trounced the Persian Empire. The defeat of the Persians in 628 AD, after several battles over several years, was the greatest triumph of Heraclius, and he achieved these military successes by flawless strategy and superb organisation, which enabled him to put a vast imperial army in the field and manoeuvre it with skill and confidence.

Then came the rise of the Muslim power. The message of Islam, manifested in the words of the Quran and conveyed by Prophet Muhammad as the last Apostle of God, had to be conveyed to all mankind; and after the Prophet's death in 11 Hijri (632 AD) Abu Bakr, the first Caliph of Islam, took it upon himself to convey that message. Two years after the Prophet he launched the campaign of Syria. Heraclius rose to defend his empire and to retain his hard-won gains. He organised an army of a 100,000 men and placed it at Ajnadein in Palestine; but his army was soundly thrashed by a Muslim army of 32,000 men under Khalid bin Al Waleed. This battle was fought in July 634. The Muslims went on to Damascus, which fell after a short siege. Heraclius again organised a large army with the intention of throwing the Muslims back into the desert, but at the Battle of Fahl in January 635, the Romans were again defeated by the Muslims. Following their success, the Muslims recaptured Damascus and went on to take Emessa and Aleppo.

Once again Heraclius made a valiant effort to stem the tide of Muslim conquest and put into the field a vast army of 150,000 imperial soldiers. Once again the Romans were defeated. At Yarmuk, in August 636, after six days of bloody, vicious fighting, Khalid annihilated this Roman army and sent the survivors fleeing in disorder from the battlefield. Next came the siege of Jerusalem, which surrendered to Caliph Umar in April 637. Again the Muslims advanced north and reoccupied the cities which they had earlier captured and then abandoned.

This time they went on to Antioch, another great city of Syria and one of the choicest pearls in the crown of the Eastern Roman Empire. Here was fought the last major battle between Heraclius and Islam and the Romans were decisively defeated by Abu Ubeida in October 637. Heraclius knew that never again would he have

the power to take Syria from the Muslims. He travelled northwards, and as he reached the border of Syria he turned to take a last sorrowing look at this fair province of the empire. He lamented: "Salutations, O Syria! And farewell from one who departs. Never again shall the Roman return to thee except in fear. O what a fine land I leave to the enemy!"[1]

Heraclius was no longer the man he once had been, and this explains why he had not taken adequate measures to defend Egypt against the Muslims. Perhaps because the traditional enemies of Rome were the Persians and most of the wars between Rome and Persia over nearly 12 centuries of imperial rivalry had been fought in Asia Minor, Syria and Mesopotamia, and very few in Egypt, Heraclius was more concerned with Asia Minor and the direct route between the imperial capitals than with Egypt. But the easy successes of Amr bin Al Aas at Farma and Bilbeis brought to his attention the vulnerability of Egypt and the magnitude of the Muslim threat. He directed Maqauqas to take strong measures for the defence of Egypt, but here too the new faith of Islam carried the day and Babylon and Memphis fell to the Muslims.

Heraclius' star was setting. In a long reign, during which he had found no peace and little rest, he had had to swallow many bitter pills, mostly at the hands of the Muslims. While the blows which the new Muslim state inflicted upon him took away much of the lustre which he had gained over 20 years of glorious campaigning, internally his position was weakened by the religious controversy mentioned in the preceding chapter. His efforts to achieve religious unity among a disunited people made him even more unpopular, especially in Egypt where his banning of the Coptic form of worship did not endear him to the Copts. His declining image was further tarnished by an act of incest . . . . . he married his own niece, Martina.

But there was life left in the old campaigner, and he was not about to surrender another fair province to Islam without a fight. The interior of Egypt was lost, but he still held the coast and the Roman Navy was still the dominant force in the Mediterranean.

1. Tabari: vol 3, p 100; Balazuri: p 142.

He still had Alexandria, the queen of cities, and if the Muslims wanted Alexandria they could come and get it. Having severely reprimanded his viceroy, in fact having roundly abused him. Heraclius sent more forces by sea to Alexandria with orders to defend the city at all cost. The Roman army quickly got down to repairing the ramparts of Alexandria and preparing it for battle. In this manner the Roman Emperor served notice on the Muslim Commander-in-Chief in Egypt that the war was still on.

Amr bin Al Aas had remained in Babylon for two months, since the fall of the city. As news of the movements of Roman forces and the preparations being made at Alexandria was brought to him, he wrote to Umar about the situation and sought his permission to advance upon Alexandria. A returning messenger brought the Caliph's orders to take Alexandria. Amr bin Al Aas left a small garrison to look aftter Babylon and gave orders for the rest of the army – about 12,000 soldiers – to march to Alexandria. It was the month of Rabi-ul-Awwal 20 Hijri (February – March 641).

For the Battle of Babylon, Amr had pitched his tent about a quarter of a mile north-east of the fort. The tent also acted as the Army Headquarters during the Battle of Babylon. Amr had remained in this tent when the fighting was over and it was here that he had met Maqauqas and agreed to bury him upon his death in the Church of Saint John in Alexandria. Whenever he was in the tent Amr could hear the cooing of a dove from above, but he paid no attention to it.

When the time came to go, Amr ordered his men to pull down his tent and pack it for the journey. It was then that he was informed that a dove had nested on top of the tent and laid eggs and the eggs had hatched. The nest was inhabited by the mother dove and its dovelings, and it was the cooing of this dove that Amr had heard.

This was a strange and unusual experience for a general like Amr bin Al Aas. The man who had spent a lifetime in the saddle, sword-in-hand, the man who had commanded armies in bloody battles in which thousands had perished, and who had slain with

his own hands scores of Romans and Greeks and Copts, was now being told by a gentle slave that there was a dove with her little ones in a nest atop his tent. If the tent were taken down, as ordered by him, the poor little things would die!

It took Amr only a moment to make up his mind about what to do with the dove. "She has taken sanctuary with us," he said to his men. "Let the tent remain until her young ones have flown away."[1]

Not only was the tent left in place but the commander of the garrison in Babylon was charged with the responsibility of seeing that it was not disturbed. The tent remained standing until the nestlings had grown up and flown away.

* * *

Alexandria stood west of the western branch of the Nile. East of this branch lay the Delta, criss-crossed by innumberable channels and water courses which carried the silt-laden waters of the mighty river to Egyptian farms. The area of the Delta would normally pose serious problems in large scale military movement, but the flood of the Nile had subsided and the problem of movement would not now be so serious.

West of the western branch of the Nile stretched the famous Western Desert, which was an extension of the Great Libyan Desert, which itself formed the eastern portion of the great Sahara. At this time of year the season was fine – February – March; the air was crystal clear and the nearness of the desert made the Arabians feel at home. In joyful mood Amr bin Al Aas and his 12,000 stalwarts set off from Giza on the main route to Alexandria, west of the Nile.

With the Muslims marched a group of Coptic leaders. Most of the Copts had thrown in their lot with the Muslims and Maqauqas had pledged to give all kinds of administrative help to facilitate the Muslim march to Alexandria. No troops from the Copts joined the Muslims; they were not going as far as that; but these leaders were to act as a command or liaison group to oversee and coordi-

1. Ibn Abdul Hakam: p 91; Suyuti: p 130.

nate the various actions to be taken by the Copts in support of the Muslims. The Copts would repair the roads, build bridges, establish camps and markets and make provisions and fodder available to the Muslim army. In fact they became a vast labour and supply corps, charging only for what they provided in the way of material and provisions.

Maqauqas had already left for Alexandria, not as a friend or agent of the Muslims but as a Roman citizen. In spite of his grievance against Heraclius and his conviction that the empire would fall before the onslaught of Islam, he remained a subject of the empire. He got to Alexandria and resumed his normal life in his old city. He was no longer viceroy and wielded no political or military power in the country, but he was still Archbishop of Egypt and still commanded a good deal of religious influence over the Copts. During the campaign that followed he was to be no more than a distinguished spectator.

It was not long before the Romans at Alexandria heard about the advance of the Muslims from Giza and the help being given to them by the Copts. This made them very angry. Having known the Copts as a submissive lot – obedient citizens who would do whatever they were told to do – the idea of their working against the Romans by joining the Mulims was an unpleasant one. The Romans suddenly realised how unpopular they were, how unwanted in Egypt. As a reaction, Heraclius sent more vessels to Alexandria with troops and arms and equipment. The Roman general in command at Alexandria had already sent a covering force forward to watch the advance of the Muslims and give notice of their movement. Now he strengthened the covering force, which would occupy a series of positions between Babylon and Alexandria. The Romans even hoped that the Muslims would remain in Babylon long enough for the Romans to build up large forces and actually take the offensive against the invaders.

On the third day of their march from Giza, the Muslim advance guard contacted a small Roman detachment at Tarnut (now Tarrana) on the west bank of the Nile. (See Map 5) A light action followed as a result of which the Romans were driven out of the village and forced to withdraw northwards. The advance guard stopped here and Amr marched up with the bulk of the army to camp at Tarnut.

The next day Amr remained in camp with the main body and sent the advance guard forward under Shareek bin Sumayy. Shareek moved along the west bank of the Nile and some time in the afternoon, when he had covered almost 20 miles from the camp, he came up against a strong force barring his path. What surprised the Muslims was that the Romans did not maintain a defensive posture. They actually attacked the Muslims, and the latter, taken aback by the speed and vigour of the Roman assault, lost their balance and fell back. Finding the initiative snatched by the Romans, who were also greater in strength than his own force, Shareek ordered a withdrawal so that he could reorganise his force and then resume the advance. He got back to a village on the bank of the Nile and took up a position here. As a result of this action the village has since been known as Kaum Shareek (the Mound of Shareek).

The next day the Romans came on. They had aggressive designs and were not going to let the Muslims decide how the war was to be fought. They intended to destroy this Muslim advance guard before the main body could come to its rescue, and with this intention they came and attacked the Muslims at Kaum Shareek. But although the Roman commander here was probably cleverer than the Muslim advance guard commander, he had not allowed for the superiority of the Muslim fighting man as a person and a warrior. The Muslims organised themselves for a defensive action and held the Romans, beating off assault after assault. Gradually the Romans moved round the west flank of the Muslims and got behind them, cutting their communications, but not before a messenger had been sent off to Amr bin Al Aas to tell him about the Muslim predicament.

The Roman force continued to press but could not make any dent in the Muslim position; and this state of affairs continued for most of the day. Then suddenly fresh Muslim forces were seen rushing up from the south, and the Romans knew that their chances of success against the advance guard were gone. They quickly disengaged and as quickly pulled away to the north.

Amr arrived to find the advance guard and Shareek bin Sumayy none the worse for their experience, but the aggressive

action of the Romans had the effect of imposing caution upon the Muslims. This may well have been the Roman intention, in order to gain time for the repair of the defences of Alexandria and for the build-up of the defence capability of the city. Amr was conscious of this and of the need for speed, but also realised that as they got nearer Alexandria, Roman resistance would increase and opposition would get stiffer. For the night the Muslim army camped at Kaum Shareek.

The following day the Muslims resumed the advance. After covering about ten miles they left the bank of the Nile and turned north-west on the road to Alexandria. On the second day of the march they re-established contact with the Romans at Sulteis, a little south of the present Damanhur, where a strong Roman force awaited the Muslims. Whether it was the Roman intention here also to attack the Muslims is not known, but Amr did not give them a chance to do so. He organised the forward elements of his army for an attack and launched them into action. This led to some hard fighting but after a while Roman resistance broke and they withdrew rapidly in the direction of Alexandria.

A day was spent at Sulteis, and then the advance was taken up again. For this phase of the advance Amr formed a strong advance guard and placed it under command of his son, Abdullah. Amr also gave his son his faithful slave, the Greek Werdan, whom he had acquired in the campaign in Palestine, to act as standard bearer with the advance guard. Young Abdullah was quite a seasoned veteran and marched off from the camp in high spirits. Till the evening he had met no opposition.

The following day the advance guard resumed the advance, followed closely by the main body of the army. Late in the morning Abdullah bin Amr bin Al Aas came up against a sizable Roman force at Kiryaun, 12 miles short of the city of Alexandria. This was the strongest Roman opposition faced by the Muslims since the fall of Babylon. (See Map 5)

* * *

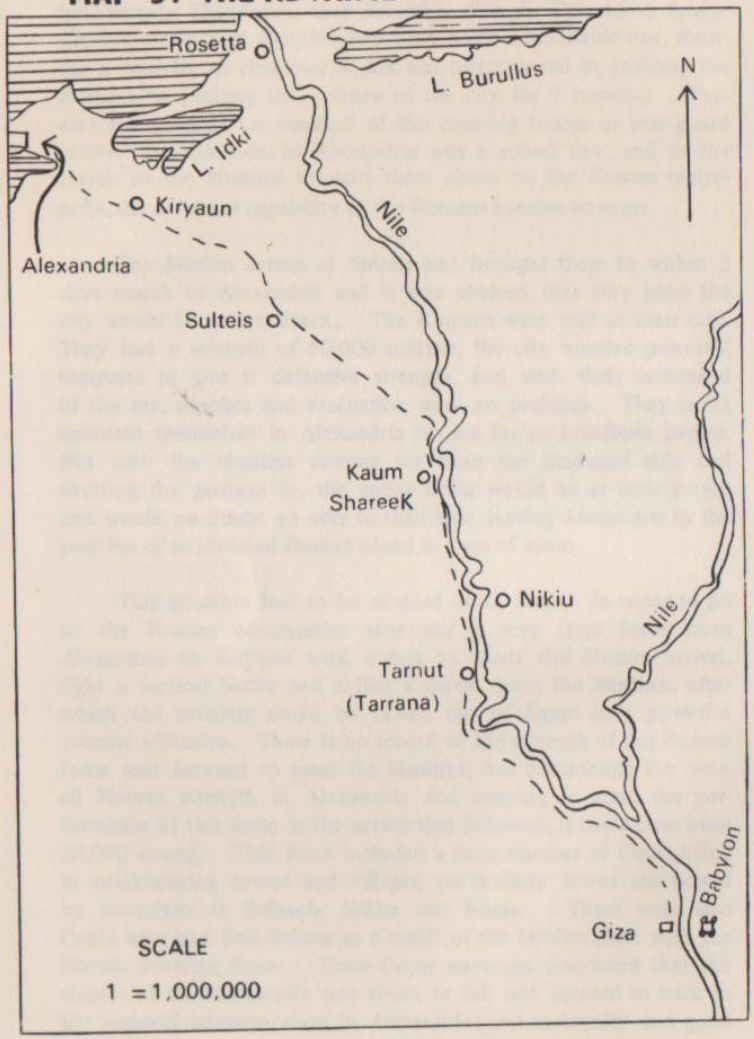
We do not know who the Roman commander was at Alexandria at this time. Historians have not mentioned his name. It may

have been the general who commanded the Roman army at Babylon, namely Theodorus, alias Mandfur, alias the Obnoxious Snake. His performance at Babylon had been quite a creditable one, showing a tenacity of character which was instrumental in enabling the Romans to prolong the defence of the city for 7 months. Whoever the general, his conduct of the covering troops or rear guard action from Babylon to Alexandria was a sound one, and as the march of the Muslims brought them closer to the Roman metropolis, the defensive capability of the Romans became stronger.

The Muslim action at Sulteis had brought them to within 2 days march of Alexandria and it was obvious that very soon the city would be under attack. The Romans were safe in their city. They had a strength of 50,000 soldiers, the city boasted powerful ramparts to give it defensive strength, and with their command of the sea, supplies and evacuation were no problem. They could maintain themselves in Alexandria by sea for an indefinite period. But with the Muslims coming up from the landward side and shutting the garrison in, the entire Delta would be at their mercy and would no doubt go over to their side, leaving Alexandria in the position of an islolated Roman island in a sea of Islam.

This situation had to be avoided at all cost. In order to do so the Roman commander sent out a very large force from Alexandria to Kiryaun with orders to await the Muslim arrival, fight a tactical battle and inflict a defeat upon the Muslims, after which the invaders could be driven out of Egypt in a powerful counter offensive. There is no record of the strength of this Roman force sent forward to meet the Muslims, but considering the overall Roman strength in Alexandria and keeping in mind the performance of this force in the action that followed, it could have been 20,000 strong. This force included a large number of Copts living in neighbouring towns and villages, particularly towns mentioned by historians as Balheeb, Sakha and Kheis. There were also Copts who had fled Sulteis as a result of the Muslim clash with the Roman covering force. These Copts were not convinced that the empire of Constantinople was about to fall and decided to stick to the imperial administration in Alexandria; and in loyalty and good faith they took up arms against the Muslims. The entire force

MAP 5: THE ADVANCE TO ALEXANDRIA



was positioned at Kiryaun before the Muslims arrived, and may well have been there even before the action at Sulteis.

The Muslims arrived in the person of Abdullah bin Amr bin Al Aas, leading the advance guard and accompanied by the Greek Werdan acting as standard bearer. His father was close upon his heels with the main body of the army. Abdullah showed more courage than wisdom in this action and immediately on contact threw his advance guard against the Romans. He got what he deserved, of course, and a little later, feeling tired from his exertions and from loss of blood from several wounds taken in the fighting, he thought to disengage and give himself and his men a rest. "O Werdan", he said to the standard bearer, "let us withdraw a little to rest our souls."

Werdan was not the man to relent. "If it is the soul you seek," he told his young master, "the soul is in front of you and not behind you."[1]

The son hung on and soon the father arrived to take the front in his own experienced hands. Amr was very pleased by the courage shown by his son, and Werdan was generous enough not to say a word about their conversation. The action here now became a high level military action with Amr bin Al Aas deploying the entire army for battle.

What followed was the Battle of Kiryaun. We do not know the details of this battle, and in the flat, even terram of Kiryaun it is not possible to identify features of tactical importance. All we know is that the battle lasted more than 10 days it involved some very hard fighting and it produced a bloody harvest of Roman dead. At last the superiority and courage of the Muslims prevailed and the Romans, along with their Coptic auxilliaries, broke and fled, with the Muslims pursuing them to the gates of Alexandria. The Muslims were not inclined to be merciful to the enemy after such a hard struggle and captured a large number of Copts who had taken part in the battle against them. These Copts were treated as slaves. Since they had fought against the Muslims, breaking the

1. Ibn Abdul Hakam: p 74.

treaty of Maqauqas, they could not be regarded as being under the protection of that treaty. But more about these slaves later.

The following day the Muslims were at the outskirts of Alexandria. They had taken 22 days to advance from Giza to the sea, fighting four actions on the way, starting with a minor skirmish at Tarnut and ending with a bloody battle at Kiryaun. What lay ahead of them was the greatest prize of Egypt . . . . . the City of Alexander the Great.

8

The Conquest of Alexandria

Alexander the Great started his conquest of Asia in 334 BC when he crossed the Dardanelles. Two years later, after several battles with the Persians, he marched into Egypt, which was then part of the Persian Empire. Egypt offered no resistance and at Memphis, Alexander was crowned pharaoh. In 332 or 331 BC he founded Alexandria. A city had already existed at this site since 1500 BC, known as Rakotis, and Alexander incorporated it into his design of the new city to be named after him. The actual construction did not get under way until the time of the first Ptolemy, and the city was finally completed during the reign of his successor in 280 BC, half a century after its founding. The new city became the capital of Egypt, replacing Memphis which had held that distinction for 3,000 years, and remained the capital for the next thousand years till the coming of the Muslims.

In the first century BC, Octavian, after defeating Mark Antony, laid out a new town, Ramlah, next to Alexandria and as a rival of Alexandria, but the latter prevailed over it and as it grew over the generations, it absorbed Ramlah and made it a part of itself. In time Alexandria became one of the finest cities of the world: a great seaport, a centre of learning and culture, a political capital and militarily almost unconquerable.

In the south-western part of the city rose the Serapeum, which was once the temple of Serapis and contained the famous Alexan-

drian library, reputed to contain 500,000 volumes. The Serapeum was like a citadel built upon a large foundation of rock in Rakotis (which existed before Alexandria) and which later became known as the Egyptian Quarter. The lofty structure known as Diocletian's Pillar, today also called Pompey's Pillar and which the Muslims named Amud-us-Sawari, towered over the temple and is today one of the impressive sites of Alexandria.

Near the other side of Alexandria, i.e. in the north-eastern part, stood the Cathedral of Saint Mark, which had been built as a temple to honour Julius Caesar and was once called the Caesarion or Qeisaria. The Cathedral is still there near the Graeco-Roman Museum and is one of the few remaining relics of ancient times.

The city also boasted two famous granite obelisks ascribed to Cleopatra but actually built 14 centuries before her by Thutmose III, and which now stand in London and New York. And at the north-eastern tip of a promontory stood the lighthouse known as Pharos, which was regarded by western scholars as one of the seven wonders of the world. The lighthouse was 400 feet high and stood at the site where the Mamluk Sultan Qait Bey built a fort and mosque in the 15th century. This famous landmark lasted until the 13th century; its foundations are now under water.

Topographically, Alexandria was built on a strip of land about 10 miles long running south-west to north-east between the Mediterranean and Lake Maryut, a low salt lake which was a few feet below sea level.[1] The strip varied in width from less than a mile at its south-western edge (about Maqs) to about 2 miles in the north-east (about Ramlah). These two townships were not part of the city as they are today but stood outside the city limits as separate habitations. Sea and lake protected the city from north and south, making it approachable only from the south-west or the north-east. It was vulnerable only from the north-east, almost east, and the main roads to Alexandria also came from this side, along the Mediterranean Coast and from the centre of the Delta.

The city was then much smaller than it is now, almost square in shape and lying south and south-east of the large promontory.

1. The lake has now been partly drained and cultivated.

The eastern edge of the city ran roughly through the present Shalalat Gardens and the western edge lay a little beyond the Serapeum. Lake Maryut was much larger than it is today and its northern bank formed the southern boundary of the city. (See Map 6)

Alexandria was a fortified city. There was a wall covering the western face also but the heaviest defences were constructed on the east. Here it had been made almost unattackable with strong forts, 7 in number, interspersed along the battlements and other forts further inside to give the defence more depth. To one approaching and entering the city from the east it would present a picture of walls behind walls and forts within forts.

This was the picture that Amr bin Al Aas saw as he arrived at Alexandria in the beginning of April 641 (Rabi-ul-Akhir 20 Hijri). He established the army camp between Hulwa and Qasr Fars, the camp extending some distance rearwards. With him in the camp were the Coptic leaders who had accompanied him from Babylon and who continued to oversee the supply of provisions and other administrative help being given by the Copts to the Muslim army.

All this we know from historical research on Alexandria and the accounts of early historians. We know that the Muslims came upon the city from the east because Qasr Fars – meaning the Castle of Persia – stood on the east and because it was the only sensible military approach for a force operating from the delta. But we do not know where exactly the tactical action was fought because we do not know the location of the battlements, the towers, gates, etc. Not a trace remains of the fortifications, and no one in Alexandria today has any knowledge even of legends which might give some indication of where they stood. No one knows even about the Church of Gold, mentioned in this chapter, or the Mosque of Mercy, built later by Amr in this city. There is a bit of a wall lying in ruinous condition in the Shalalat Gardens, but this was built much later by the Muslims themselves. And to make confusion worse confounded, we are told that after two months in camp on the eastern side of Alexandria, Amr shifted his camp to Maqs, which lies on the western side.[1]

1. Ibn Abdul Hakam: p 76

It is not possible to describe a battle tactically without relating it to the ground. In the case of Alexandria there is no way of knowing the ground as it was. Hence, the description of the siege that follows is a narrative constructed from the early historical accounts without an attempt to connect the events with specific parts of the fort or the ground. As for the move to Maqs, it was most probably a detachment sent there for some purpose, while the camp was moved to another forward location but still on the east. To move the entire army along a wide detour south of the then extensive Lake Maryut, leaving his communications wide open to the Romans, would be a blunder too foolish for a shrewd and seasoned general like Amr bin Al Aas to commit.

* * *

The Muslim camp was some distance away from Alexandria, and from the front of their camp the Muslims could see the walls and towers of the city rising in great splendour. The city would have to be taken by storm, its towers assaulted, its walls scaled and breached. There was no short cut to the problem, no way of avoiding a direct frontal clash. Amr moved his men forward of the camp for battle (the camp was only for resting, for eating and for the night) and formed them up in the space between the camp and the battlements. North of the battlements stretched the Mediterranean, on the south lay the edge of Lake Maryut.

The first act in the drama was a heavy pounding of the Muslims by Roman catapults mounted on the walls of Alexandria. The Romans were experts at this kind of warfare and the experience of being at the receiving end of the boulders hurled by the giant engines was an unpleasant one for the Muslims. Amr ordered his men back from their advanced position and the Muslims, dodging rocks, fell back towards their camp which was outside catapult range of the fort.

This artillery fire – the catapult and ballista were the artillery pieces of the time and the rocks they hurled corresponded to our present-day shells – came down frequently. It did not cause much physical damage but it held the Muslims back and caused a delay and disruption in their assault. For some reason Amr did not have catapults constructed for use by the Muslims, as he had done against Babylon, and when a certain person suggested their

construction in order to breach the walls of the city, Amr rebuked him. The Muslims remained without siege engines and other heavy equipment. There is no mention in the early accounts of even ladders, but they must have used ladders as they did at Babylon, because in their assaults they often got inside Alexandria, and they could not have scaled the walls without ladders.

But the Roman catapults did not come into action every day. On many days the battle would consist of infantry and cavalry actions with catapults playing no part or playing a limited role by covering the movement of Roman forces from and to the gates of Alexandria. In the early days of the operation the Romans launched determined sallies from the fort with the intention of throwing the Muslims back, and these sallies were almost a daily occurrence, but every one of them was repulsed with heavy loss. There was fierce fighting every day as the Romans tried desperately to break the Muslim grip. For the first month or two this state of affairs went on – nothing vital, nothing decisive, just a stubborn attempt by each side to wear down the other in a slogging match in which individual stamina and skill counted for more than generalship. The Muslims, strategically on the offensive, remained tactically on the defensive.

One day a Roman sortie led to some brisk fighting on the front of the Muslim tribe of Mahra, in which they lost a man and the Romans cut off his head and took it away. The men of Mahra were very angry. "We will not bury the body without its head," they declared, and the sight of the headless body added fuel to their anger.

Then Amr came and said to the tribe, "You are getting angry as if those you are angry with care about your anger. When next the enemy comes out, attack him, kill one and cut off his head, then exchange his head for the head of your comrade."[1]

As luck would have it, the defenders sallied forth again the next day and this time the Mahra killed a Roman officer and cut off his head. They let the Romans take away the body but

1. *Ibid.*

refused to deliver the head until they got their comrade's head back. Finally agreement was reached between the two sides. The Arabs flung the Roman head into the fort and the Romans flung the head of the Arab from the wall into the field outside. The Mahra now gave their martyr a decent burial.

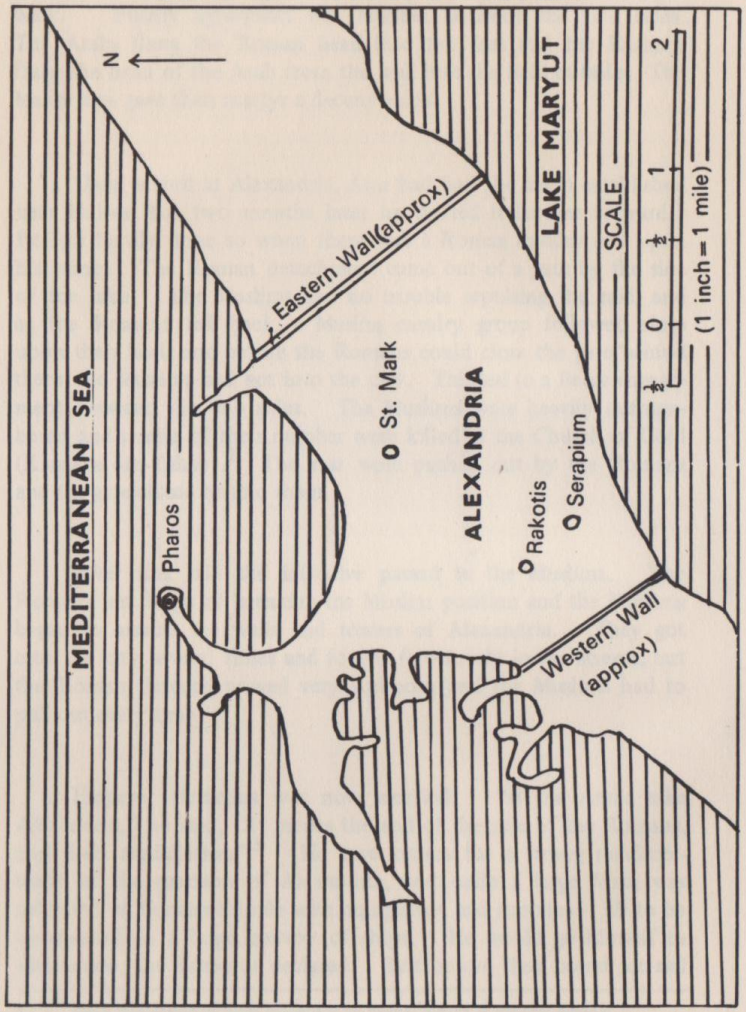
Upon arrival at Alexandria, Amr had had the camp established near Hulwa, but two months later he shifted it further forward.[1] He had hardly done so when there was a Roman cavalry raid upon his camp. The Roman detachment came out of a gate by the side of the lake. The Muslims had no trouble repulsing the raid, and as the Romans fell back, a Muslim cavalry group followed close upon their heels and before the Romans could close the gate behind them, the Muslims had got into the city. This led to a fierce engagement between the two sides. The Muslims were heavily outnumbered and twelve of their number were killed at the Church of Gold (Kaneesat-uz-Zahab).[2] The rest were pushed out by the Romans and the gate closed behind them.

After this raid the initiative passed to the Muslims. The Romans lost hope of breaking the Muslim position and the Muslims began to assault the walls and towers of Alexandria. They got into the city several times and fought ferociously in the streets, but the Roman defence proved very stubborn and the Muslims had to pull out every time.

Emperor Heraclius was now worried. "If the Arabs take Alexandria," he said, "it means the end of the rule of the Romans, and their annihilation".[3] He gave orders for a strong reinforcement of the garrison of Alexandria, and quite a large force was collected at Constantinople with equipment and supplies – all to be transported in a large convoy of ships. He would go himself to Alexandria, the Emperor declared. But before they could set sail

1. He is supposed to have moved it to Maqs, which is clearly wrong.
2. There is no sign today of the Church of Gold.
3. Ibn Abdul Hakam: p 76.

MAP 6: ALEXANDRIA



Heraclius died, and those who had assembled as reinforcements for Alexandria dispersed. No one came to the beleaguered city.[1]

* * *

The death of Heraclius led to an intensification of Muslim efforts to get into the fort and bring the battle to an end. Yet, there was no slackening of Roman resistance, no decline in Roman spirits as they fought bravely in defence of their city. They even sallied out of the fort now and then to attack the Muslims. It was one of these sallies which led to the episode of the Muslim Commander-in-Chief being trapped inside the fort.

The Romans carried out a sortie in strength and this led to heavy fighting. During the action a Roman champion threw a challenge which was taken up by Maslama bin Mukhallad, one of the best fighters on the Muslims side. As luck would have it, the Roman got the better of the Muslim. He was able to dislodge his opponent from his horse, and as the Muslim fell to the ground, the Roman advanced to kill him, but the latter was saved by a comrade who came up in the nick of time to engage the Roman and divert him from the fallen warrior.

Maslama was very young – just 19. He was big-built, heavy and fleshy. His losing this duel was simply a case of bad luck, but the effect of it on the two armies can be imagined. The Romans exulted while the Muslims were distressed. Amr bin Al Aas was furious and said something vulgar, about Maslama looking like a woman and acting like a woman. This was at once conveyed to Maslama, who seethed with anger at the unkind remark of his general, but could do nothing about it.

The fighting continued – the same action – and the Muslims began to push the Romans back. As the Romans withdrew, the

1. There is some confusion about the timing of Heraclius' death in relation to the siege. Muslim historians place it during the siege, as stated here, and some Christian historians hold the same view. According to Gibbon, however, he died 50 days after the fall of Alexandria. Moreover, he died on February 11, 641 AD, while Muslim chroniclers give the start of the Muslim march from Alexandria as Rabi-ul-Awwal, 20 Hijri, i.e. February-March 641 AD. In other words, Heraclius must have been cold in his grave before the siege of Alexandria began:
There is a difference of opinion even about the duration of the siege: 3 months, 6 months, 14 months. I have picked the figure of 6 months as the most reasonable and most likely.

Muslims followed and soon after attacked and got into one of the towers of Alexandria. This led to a fierce reaction from the Romans who counter-attacked and expelled the Muslims – all except four, who were trapped in the tower as the Romans closed the outer gate. These four quickly descended to an underground chamber – a bathing place of some kind into which the Romans could not attack because of the narrowness of the passage which led to it. The Romans knew that there were four Muslims sheltering in the cellar but did not know their identity. These four were Amr bin Al Aas, Maslama bin Mukhallad and two others.

The Romans could do nothing about the trapped Muslims. They could not get at them to fight them but instead would have to leave a strong guard to keep watch over them and wait till hunger forced them out of their celler. This was not something the Romans wanted to do, so they decided to offer terms to the Muslims and got an interpreter who knew Arabic to transmit their message.

"You are now captives in our hands," said the Romans. "So surrender and do not kill yourselves."

The Muslim answer was NO.

Then the Romans said, "Some of our men are prisoners in the hands of your comrades. We promise not to kill you but to use you in an exchange of prisoners."

This arrangement also was rejected.

The Romans conferred among themselves for a while and made a third offer: "Then agree to another condition which is fair to you and to us. You give us your word and we give you ours, that one of us and one of you will fight in single combat. If our man beats your man, you will surrender yourselves to us. And if your man beats our man, we will let you go in peace to your comrades."

To this Amr agreed.

The Romans promptly produced one of their best champions, one who exulted in his strength and courage, and called to the Muslims to produce their man.

Amr wanted to take on the Roman himself but was deterred by Maslama bin Mukhallad. "Do not commit two errors at one time. You got separated from your men while you are their commander and they depend upon you and their hearts are with you and they are unaware of your plight. Now do not offer yourself for single combat. If you are killed it will be a catastrophe for your men. Keep your place and I will fight on your behalf, if Allah wills it."[1]

Amr agreed to this arrangement and prayed for the success of his comrade.

The Muslims came out of the cellar into a chamber where the contest was to take place. Here Maslama and the Roman champion faced each other and the fight began.

The two stalwarts were well matched and exchanged blows for a long time. They were watched in tense silence by the Muslims, and with a good deal of apprehension, for upon the result of this duel depended their lives. If Maslama lost the duel the Romans would corner them like rats and slaughter them immediately. No doubt the three Muslims would kill at least twice their number of Romans before they themselves fell, but they were certainly in for it if their man lost. And their man knew it too as he struggled against the Roman champion, knew that upon his skill and courage depended not only his own life but also the lives of his three fellow-Muslims. Then Maslama killed his opponent, and a roar of "Allaho Akbar" issued from three Muslim throats.

The Romans kept their word. They opened the gate of the tower and let the Muslims go in peace to join their comrades. They still did not know that one of the four Muslims who were slipping through their fingers was the army commander. They were to discover this a little later, and then would gnash their teeth in anger at their folly.[2]

---

1. Ibn Abdul Hakam: p 78.
2. There is the story, in connection with this episode, related by later historians, of Amr nearly giving himself away in front of the Romans by acting like a big shot, and an intelligent slave slapping him for his apparent insolence, to deceive the Romans about his real station in life. I have not found this story in the sources which I have examined. It may be true, though it seems out of character for a man as shrewd as Amr bin Al Aas to make such a mistake.

On rejoining his army, after the jubilation of their safe return was over, Amr was overcome by remorse at what he had said about Maslama bin Mukhallad being like a woman and acting like a woman. He put it straight to Maslama: "Forgive me for what I said about you."

Maslama forgave him; and Amr went on: "I have never uttered vulgar things except thrice in my life, twice during the Ignorance and once this time.[1] Every time I have repented and felt ashamed of myself but never as ashamed as I feel of what I said about you. By Allah, I hope there will not be a fourth time in my life".[2]

* * *

The siege wore on. The struggle for Alexandria continued between an unrelenting attacker and an unyielding defender with no decision in sight. No clever tactical manoeuvres were possible in this situation – no flank attacks, no turning movements – and there was nothing the Muslims could do but attack the ramparts frontally between the lake and the sea. No surprise was possible. Several times the Muslims broke into the city but were evicted every time. So the siege wore on, month after painful month. But spirits did not flag; courage did not weaken.

Started in Rabi-ul-Akhir 20 Hijri (roughly beginning of April 641) the confrontation went on for six months which takes us to the month of Shawwal (September-October). Another man, a boy really, sat upon the throne of Byzantium, Constans II (Qustantin), and it is believed that he leaned towards Maqauqas and either re-appointed him viceroy or wished to do so. At Madina an impatient Umar awaited news of a breakthrough in Egypt. He suspected that the Muslims were getting soft.

Finally, the Caliph wrote to Amr bin Al Aas: "I am surprised at the delay in your conquest of Egypt. You have been fighting there for two years. This is what happens when you change and begin to love the things of this world as your enemies love them. Lo, Allah Most High does not help a nation unless it had purity of intention.

1. The Ignorance was the name by which the Muslims referred to the period before Islam.
2. Ibn Abdul Hakam: p 78.

"I had sent you four men and had informed you that each of them was the equal of a thousand, as I knew them; unless that which has changed others has changed them also. When you get this my letter, address the people and urge them to fight their enemy and to be steadfast. Send these four ahead of the men, and let the men advance together so that their attack is like the attack of one man.

"But let this be in the early afternoon of a Friday, for that is the hour of the coming of God's blessings and the acceptance of prayers. And let the people turn to Allah and beseech His help."[1]

Amr read the letter carefully. He spent some time thinking about his problem. Then he sought the advice of Maslama bin Mukhallad about how to deal with the situation. Maslama said, "I think you should find one from the Companions of the Messenger of Allah, on whom be the blessings of Allah and peace, who has knowledge and experience. Appoint him commander over the men, and let him be the one who leads the attack."

"Who is such a man?" asked Amr.

"Ubada bin As-Samit," replied Maslama.[2]

Amr spent some more time thinking about his problem. At last he concluded that what was needed for victory was not military stratagem but Allah's help, and this would be more readily available to those who were nearer Him. "Only those can put things right at the end", he mused, "who had put things right at the beginning."[3] He was thinking of the Ansars, the inhabitants of Madina, who had saved the Holy Prophet from terrible persecution and certain death at Mecca by inviting him to Madina, where the Muslim state as such actually began. Hence Amr's reference to those who put things right at the beginning. Ubada bin As-Samit – our big, black friend who had frightened Maqauqas out of his wits – was an Ansar.

Amr sent for Ubada and appointed him commander of the assault troops for the next attack upon Alexandria.

1. *Ibid:* p 79.
2. *Ibid,*
3. *Ibid.*

On the following Friday, the entire army assembled at midday for the congregational prayer. The attack would be mounted after the prayer, and for this attack plans had already been formulated, orders already given, preparations already made. As the men assembled in the open, makeshift mosque, Amr read out to them the letter of the Caliph. Then he called the four champions, the *Hazar mards,* and lined them up in front of the men. Then, with Amr as *Imam,* the Muslims offered the congregational prayer and implored Allah for victory.

As soon as the prayer was over, the army formed up for attack with the four stalwarts in the lead, under Ubada's command. The Muslims attacked Alexandria; and Allah gave them victory. The city fell. We know nothing about how this attack was launched and what course the battle took, except that the fort was stormed through the gate near the Church of Gold.

This happened in Shawwal 20 Hijri (October 641 A D.).[1]

* * *

"I have conquered a city," wrote Amr bin Al Aas to the Caliph, "from a description of which I shall refrain, except to say that I have found in it 4,000 palatial houses with 4,000 baths and 40,000 tax-paying Jews and 400 places of amusement for princes."[2] The Muslims also counted 12,000 green grocers in Alexandria, and found that shortly before its fall, 70,000 Jews had evacuated the city.

The impact of the conquest of Alexandria was staggering – one of the most devastating blows taken by the Roman Empire in its long and painful history. For the Muslims it was a breathtaking success. They had acquired one of the greatest cities of the world, a port and naval base of incomparable value, and had driven the Roman power out of Egypt. It would not be correct to say that the loss to the Roman fleet was a crippling one, but it did have a restricting effect on their naval power. And it gave the Muslims an induce-

1. There is confusion about the date of this victory. The date I have worked out seems reasonable to me, after a 6-months siege (Suyuti, p 130), the march from Babylon having begun in Rabi-ul-Awwal (Suyuti: p 129; Yakut: vol 3, p 896); and taking note of Umar's reference to the Muslims being in Egypt for two years. The invasion had begun in early December, 639. The possibility of error exists.
2. Ibn Abdul Hakam: p 82.

ment to extend their military power by naval means. Most important of all, it opened the gates to the conquest of North Africa by the Muslims in the decades that followed.

We have no accurate estimate of casualties suffered in the Battle of Alexandria. Gibbon gives the loss of life as 23,000 men but this figure appears to be somewhat exaggerated. As a matter of interest for Muslim scholars, among the famous Muslims who took part in the Battle of Alexandria were Abu Zar al Ghifari and Abu Ayub Ansari.[1] The latter, whose actual name was Khalid bin Zeid, was the one at whose house the Holy Prophet had stayed upon arrival in Madina and who took part in and lost his life in the first Muslim attack on Constantinople. He lies buried at Istanbul.

And now Maqauqas, alias Cyrus Archbishop of Egypt, came into action again as a man of God seeking noble and peaceful ends. Mention has been made earlier of his having returned to Alexandria after his dismissal and his living there as a citizen and as religious leader of the Copts. During the siege he had asked Amr for peace but Amr would have nothing short of complete surrender. He had then tried several times to persuade the Romans to make peace, but was rebuffed every time. After the fall of the city the Muslims decided to regard him as the leader of the Egyptians, thus, in a way, re-elevating him and re-appointing him viceroy of Egypt. And Maqauqas again began to deal with the Muslims as political head of the land.

The first item which he took up with the conquerors was the fate of Egyptians taken captive in war and sold as slaves. As narrated in the preceding chapter, many Copts living in and around Kiryaun, and these included men from Sulties, Balheeb, Sakha and Kheis, had fought on the Roman side at Kiryaun. Upon the defeat of the Romans many of these men were taken prisoner and, according to the custom of the time, sold into slavery. And at the time when Alexandria fell, some of these slaves were in Mecca and Madina. Maqauqas was a gentle, kindly soul and the thought of his followers living as slaves in distant lands caused him deep anguish.

1. *Ibid:* pp 93-94.

He wrote to Amr: "I used to pay taxes to those more hateful to me than you, O nation of Arabs – to the Persians and the Romans. If you wish I will pay taxes to you also, provided you return to me the captives of my land."[1]

Amr wrote about the matter to the Caliph, and the Caliph gave orders that all Coptic captives be freed, that even the people of Alexandria and the other towns from which captives were taken, who were not under the protection of any treaty, would be regarded as free citizens, so long as they paid the Jizya. Umar went so far as to collect all the Coptic slaves in Mecca and Madina and other parts of Arabia and repatriate them to their native land. But he laid down one small condition: before being freed, these captives would be offered Islam. Whoever accepted the new faith would become one with the great brotherhood of Islam; whoever did not would be set free and could return to his people. To this Maqauqas agreed.

The condition of offering Islam to the captives before their release was fulfilled in the case of all of them. Sometimes this led to amazing scenes and expressions of joy or sorrow, as the case may be. Most of the captives were given the offer of Islam in a ceremonious fashion at a large gathering of Muslims and local Christians, each group standing on one side of a field in the middle of which the captives were led in turn and asked the fateful question. When a Copt declared his faith in Islam there would be a thundering "Allaho Akbar" from the Muslim side and the Christians would wring their hands in anguish. When a captive refused to accept Islam and stuck to his original faith, the Christians would dance for joy and the Muslims would be grief-stricken. In the case of one fine and intelligent young Copt, his parents and brothers had come to receive him while his Muslim captors ardently sought his conversion to Islam. When he was asked the question, he opted for Islam. Upon this his parents and brothers rushed to him and catching hold of him, began to pull him towards the Christian side, while the Muslims held on to him from the other side. In the frantic tug-of-war that followed the poor fellow lost all his clothes. But the Muslims got him, and he lived happily ever after as Abu Maryam, Abdullah bin Abdur Rahman.[2]

1. Tabari: vol 3, p 196.
2. *Ibid:* p 197.

This problem of prisoners was satisfactorily settled, but the question of distribution of spoils led to serious disagreement among the Muslims. Alexandria was taken by the sword, and according to the usage of war and Islamic law, everything in the city was a legitimate prize of war and belonged rightly to the conquerors. Of this, one-fifth would normally be sent to Madina and four-fifths distributed among those who had fought and conquered. Most of the Muslims who had fought at Alexandria wanted to lay their hands on the wealth of the city and asked their commander to distribute this wealth.

Amr was not sure if that would be the right thing to do. The Muslims undoubtedly had a moral and legal right to it as conquerors, but there was this pact with Maqauqas, and the Holy Prophet had enjoined upon the Muslims kindness to the Copts, and the Copts had been a great help in the matter of supply and maintenance. Amr refused to distribute the wealth of Alexandria.

Then Zubeir bin Al Awwam entered the dispute, on the side of the majority. "Distribute it, O Amr bin Al Aas," he said.

"No by Allah," replied Amr, "I shall not distribute it."

"By Allah, you *will* distribute it," Zubeir insisted, "even as the Messenger of Allah distributed the spoils of Kheibar."

Amr stuck to his decision, though he could feel the pressure mounting. "By Allah," he repeated, "I shall not distribute it. . . . . at least until I have written to the Commander of the Faithful."

Amr wrote to Madina about this problem of the distribution of the spoils of Alexandria, mentioning in his letter that most Muslims favoured distribution. The Caliph replied, "Do not distribute it but leave it to the Egyptians, so that their taxes can be a means of sustenance for the Muslims and a source of strength in their war against their enemies."[1]

Alexandria was left in peace, saved from plunder. Under a treaty drawn up with Maqauqas, everybody in Egypt would pay

1. Ibn Abdul Hakam: pp 82, 88.

Jizya at the rate of 2 dinars per head, as was agreed at Babylon, and those in Alexandria who possessed land would pay an extra tax, the amount depending upon the produce of their land. In return they were free to live as they wished, worship as they wished, do as they wished, and their security from foreign enemies was guaranteed by the Muslim state. This would apply to all Roman citizens, but those who did not agree to the payment of the Jizya could leave for Byzantium.

There were 200,000 Romans in Alexandria, and of this number 30,000 migrated to Constantinople. They were the wealthy ones, those who had pull, and they sailed away in a hundred ships with their goods and their wealth. The remainder stayed on in Alexandria as subjects of the Muslim state, though not loyal subjects, as we shall see.

The Jizya-paying population of Alexandria, and this excluded women and children, numbered 600,000.

9

The New Capital of Egypt

The Muslims liked Alexandria. It was a splendid city and had a thrilling effect upon the simple Arab of the desert. It also had a lovely climate which, with the gentle breeze of the Mediterranean, made it one of the nicest places to live in. The Arabs fell for Alexandria.

Amr did too. The more he saw of it the more he liked it. He adored the buildings and houses of the city and, practical man that he was, thought there was enough accommodation for everyone here. He wished to stay and make the place the main Muslim cantonment in Egypt. Consequently he wrote to the Caliph and asked for permission for the Muslims to take up their abode in Alexandria.

Umar was averse to large bodies of water. He did not like them. Over the past few years, while Muslim conquests spread far and wide. he had continually deterred his generals from going across wide rivers. When Sad bin Abi Waqqas conquered Ctesiphon after having got across the Euphrates and the Tigris, Umar refused him permission to follow up the Persian retreat for fear that the Muslim army in Iraq would leave two mighty rivers behind it. In fact, he ordered Sad to go back to the desert side of these rivers to establish cantonments for the Muslims; and thus Kufa and Basra were founded west of the Euphrates and the Tigris. The Caliph had written to Sad and to the governor of Basra: "Let

there not be water obstacles between you and me, so that if I mount my riding beast to visit you, I do not have to dismount except at your place."[1]

Only once had Umar relented. In 20 Hijri, while the siege of Alexandria was on, he had submitted to the pressure of Muawia, governor of Damascus, and given permission for a naval operation against the Romans. In consequence a Muslim force was transported in a flotilla of 20 vessels from the Syrian coast towards some objective in "Rome", probably some spot on the southern coast of what is now Turkey, but the entire force came to grief and Umar wished he had stuck to his earlier resolve against seaborne operations. He swore this would never happen again.[2]

This aversion to water was not, however, shared by all his fellow-countrymen. The Arabs, especially those of the Yaman, were a sea-faring people and known to be amongst the best seamen of the time. They sailed their vessels to India and Ceylon and Indonesia and down the east coast of Africa. But Umar did not like water. That is why, upon reading Amr's request for permission to stay in Alexandria, the first question he asked of the courier who had brought the letter from Egypt, was whether there would be water between him and the Muslim camp at Alexandria. The courier replied that there wouuld be, especially when the Nile was in flood.

The Caliph promptly wrote to his Commander-in-Chief in Egypt: "I do not wish the Muslims to take up their abode where water intervenes between them and me, in winter or in summer."[3]

Amr bin Al Aas read the letter of the Caliph. Then he read it aloud to his officers. He asked them where they should set up their permanent camp in Egypt. "Let us return, O Commander, to your tent," they replied, "so we shall be close to water and to the desert." They used the word *fustat* for tent. This word has

1. Ibn Abdul Hakam : p 91.
2. Yaqubi: *Tareekh:* vol 2, p 156. According to Tabari (vol 3, p 202) the objective of the expedition was Abyssinia. I favour the former version.
3. Ibn Abdul Hakam: p 91.

several meanings, including city and gathering place, but the meaning associated with the word here was *tent.* And the Muslims were referring to Amr's woollen tent which he had left standing in Babylon.

"Let us return to the place of Fustat," said Amr bin Al Aas.[1]

Amr left a thousand men under Abdullah bin Huzafa to garrison Alexandria. And some time early in 21 Hijri (642 AD) the Muslim army struck camp and marched to Amr's tent; Fustat – the new capital of Egypt.

* * *

The dove and its young ones, for whose sake Amr bin Al Aas had left his tent standing in Babylon with orders that it was not to be taken down, had flown away long before. But the tent was still there when the Muslims returned from their campaign of Alexandria. Around this tent the Muslim army would take up its quarters and build a new city; and because the new city would grow up around the tent, it would be given the name of Fustat . . the Tent.

Very soon disputes arose among the Muslims about who should build where. Apparently some plots were nicer than others, and individual vied with individual, clan with clan, tribe with tribe, for the choicest spots. Everybody wanted the best. To solve the problem Amr appointed a committee of 4 Muslim chiefs to study the requirements, coordinate plans and settle disputes. This the 4 chiefs did admirably, and the construction of the new capital got off to a smooth and efficient start.

The first structure to come up in Fustat was the mosque, which was to become famous as the Mosque of Amr bin Al Aas. Its site was selected on the tent of Amr, and it was so placed that the *Mihrab* and the pulpit came to be located on the exact spot where the tent had stood.[2] The site of the mosque as then chosen was in an area covered with gardens and vineyards, and Amr personally supervised the laying out of the *Qibla,* i.e. the direction of

1. Yaqut: vol 3, p 896.
2. The Mihrab is the arched niche in the wall towards Mecca, placed centrally in the wall.

Mecca. The mosque was built quite large, almost 100 feet wide and over 50 feet deep.[1]

The mosque was started and completed in 21 Hijri (642), and it was a beautiful mosque. The first time that it was used for the congregational prayer there were 80 Companions of the Prophet present in the mosque, including such highly venerated persons as Zubeir bin Al Awwam, Abu Zar Al Ghifari and Ubada bin As-Samit. The *Muezzin* of Amr bin Al Aas, who called the faithful to prayer at this mosque, was also a Companion, one named Abu Muslim Al Ghafaqi.[2]

The mosque was given a pulpit for the Imam, i.e. the leader of the prayer, but is was unusual to have pulpits in mosques in those times. The Holy Prophet had constructed one in his mosque in Madina and would mount it when addressing the populace, but the others did not use pulpits in mosques. When Umar came to know about this he disapproved of the construction of the pulpit and wrote to Amr. "It has come to my notice that you have built a pulpit by means of which you stand above the shoulders of the Muslims, which is the same as your standing with the Muslims under your heels. I command you to dismantle the pulpit."[3]

Amr chose a site for his own house next to the gate of the mosque and built a main house plus an extra one adjacent to it. Other Companions also took plots and built houses, noteworthy among them being Zubeir, Ubada, Abu Zar, Abu Ayub Ansari, the son of the Caliph and the son of Amr bin Al Aas – both named Abdullah. Amr even earmarked a large plot of land near the mosque for Umar, and wrote to the Caliph: "We have selected a place for your house near the mosque." Umar was too big a man to think of acquiring property for himself, and wrote back: "What can a man living in the Hijaz do with a house in Egypt?[4] Let it

1. 50 cubits by 30 cubits (Yaqut: vol 3, p 898).
2. The Mosque of Amr bin Al Aas has been rebuilt many times since its original construction and is even now (March 1976) under reconstruction. It is a large mosque today, about 200 yards wide and 150 yards deep, but the position of the mihrab must have changed with all the reconstruction.
3. Ibn Abdul Hakam: p 92.
4. The Hijaz is the large province of Arabia on the Red Sea, in which Mecca and Madina are located.

be used as a market for the Muslims." The plot was consequently turned into a market . . . . . .a slave market![1]

All houses in the new capital were of one storey and this fitted in well with the egalitarian spirit of the desert Arab. But one man built an upper storey on his house which was resented by his neighbours, who got the feeling that he could look into the privacy of their homes. They complained about this to the Caliph. The man in question was no common soldier; he was Kharija bin Huzafa, one of the champions *(hazar mard)* chosen by Umar for the campaign. But that did not entitle him to, break the normal custom. He may have been equal to a thousand men in combat but he had the rights of only one man.

"It has come to my notice", wrote the Caliph to the Commander-in-Chief, "that Kharija bin Huzafa has built an upper storey. Perhaps Kharija wishes to see into the private apartments of his neighbours. When you get this my letter demolish it. And salutations."[2] Kharija lost his upper storey.

So the Muslims settled down and built Fustat. The city was built east of and contiguous with Babylon but overlapped the old town on its northern and southern flanks. As it grew, it absorbed Babylon within itself and the entire city became one large metropolis.[3]

Soon after their return from Alexandria, when the spring and calving time had come, a large part of the army was dispersed with the animals to various districts of Lower Egypt for ease of procuring food and fodder. The tribes and clans usually stayed together. But farming was not permitted to the Muslims because of the Caliph's policy that the land should be left in the hands of the locals so that they could pay revenue and taxes for the Muslim treasury. One man, Shareek bin Summayy by name, did start a farm in spite of the orders of Amr bin Al Aas, who then informed the Caliph about the matter. The man was sent for and given a good dressing down by the Caliph.

* * *

1. Ibn Abdul Hakam : p 92.
2. *Ibid.* p 104.
3. Today Fustat and Babylon are referred to as Misr-al-Qadimah, the Old Misr.

Even Giza, lying west of the Nile and famous for its pyramids, was settled by the Muslims though not by the wish of the Caliph or the Commander-in-Chief and only with their reluctant acquiescence.[1] The way it came about was that on the return of the army from Alexandria, Amr placed a few clans at Giza as a protective force. While the Muslims built their new capital east of the Nile, these clans would stay west of the river to watch for the approach for any Roman forces undiscovered by the Muslims or disloyal elements from Alexandria who might try to surprise the Muslims. These clans came from many parts of the Arab world and there were even some Ethiopians among them. They all fell in love with the place where they were located.

Later in the year, when the construction of Fustat was progressing well and Amr felt that he was now in no danger from any unlocated enemy, he called upon these clans to cross over and join the main body of the Muslims. The clans did not like the idea of the move and would not come. They sent their commander the message: "We have advanced here in the way of Allah. We are not going from this place to another."

Amr did not wish to force the issue. The clans had fought well in the war and deserved the right to choose the place of their residence. So he wrote to the Caliph to inform him of this incident and explained how the whole thing happened. Once again Umar was confronted with the situation he abhorred – troops being positioned on the wrong side of a big river, something he had fought against for years. But he also saw the compulsions of the situation, though not being close to the troops he could act with more detachment.

"How could you agree to your men being separate from you?" he wrote to Amr. "It is not right for you to have a river between yourself and a single one of your men. You will not know of dangers that befall them and will not be able to go to their aid; and they will suffer an unpleasant fate. Get them together with yourself. And if they refuse to come to you and are obsessed with their place, build them a fort."

1. The name is correctly spelled Jeeza, but I have used the spelling in common use today.

Amr spoke to the men. Again they refused to change their location. He told them of the Caliph's orders about the construction of a fort at Giza to give them protection in case of enemy threat. They did not want this either. "Our swords are our forts," they proudly assured their commander.[1] But Amr had a fort built all the same. Its construction began in 21 Hijri and was completed the following year, which corresponded to 643 AD.

Giza was one of the best districts of Egypt and these clans lived happily at Giza, as indeed the Muslims lived in Egypt. Prophet Muhammad had said: "Giza is one of the gardens of paradise, and Egypt is Allah's treasure upon the earth."[2]

* * *

Then there was the Hill of Muqattam. Along the east bank of the Nile, from deep in the south near the Sudan, runs a range of hills which ends in Cairo at the Hill of Muqattam. In pharaonic times the top of this hill was used as a lighthouse with a beacon to guide boats plying on the Nile. But at the time of the Muslim conquest it was just a bare hill, brown in colour and with rocky promontories, about 3 miles east of Babylon with a low spur running towards the town. It was a bare but pretty hill and people would go for walks on it.

Maqauqas and Amr bin Al Aas would often meet and talk and walk together. One day Maqauqas asked Amr to sell him the Hill of Muqattam for 70,000 gold dinars. Amr was taken aback by the unusual request and the high price offered for the barren and worthless hill. He said he would ask the Caliph.

In response to Amr's letter, the Caliph wrote: "Ask him why he wishes to pay you what he wishes to pay you, for it cannot be farmed, no water issues from it and it can give him no benefit."

Soon after this Amr and Maqauqas were walking along the top of Muqattam. Amr turned to the priest and said, "O Maqauqas, why is this hill of yours so bare? There are no trees or bushes on it as on the hills of Syria."

1. Ibn Abdul Hakam: p 128; Yaqut: vol 2, p 177.
2. Suyuti: p 17.

Maqauqas replied, "We have found in our books that this hill used to have more of trees and bushes and fruits than other hills. And Muqattam son of Misr son of Beisar son of Ham son of Noah used to stop on it.[1] Then came the day when God was to speak to Moses and He announced to the hills, 'I am about to speak to one of my prophets from a hill from amongst you.'

"When the hills heard this, they all became bigger and loftier, all except this one. It shrank and became smaller. When God saw this He asked the hill, 'Why have you become so?' And the hill replied, 'In awe of your glory, O Lord'.

"Then God ordered all the hills to give him some of the plants which grew on them, and Muqattam gave generously, gave all that grew upon it, so it became as you see it now. And God said to it, 'I shall compensate you with the tree of heaven.' "

Amr wrote this story to the Caliph, who then instructed his general: "I do not know of the tree of heaven except for the faithful. Make it a graveyard for the Muslims. Bury on it those Muslims who die before you, and do not sell it to him at any price."

Amr did so, and was later himself buried at the foot of the hill. But when he told Maqauqas about the Caliph's decision the Archbishop became very angry. "What is this?" he burst out. "It is not for this that we made our treaty with you."

To calm down the old man, Amr earmarked part of the land at the foot of the hill for the Christians to use as a cemetry and had a clear boundary drawn between the Muslim part and the Christian part of the hill.[2]

What started here as a cemetry was like a trickle which in course of time turned into a flood, for today the entire space between the old city and the Hill of Muqattam is a vast zone of graves, aptly named "the City of the Dead."

1. The story of Misr, father of Muqattam, has been described in the second chapter of this book.
2. There are several versions of this story but the variations are minor. What is given here is an amalgam of what could be amalgamated, as related by Ibn Abdul Hakam: pp 157-58; Suyuti: pp 137-9; and Yaqut: vol 4, pp 607-8.

10

The Caliph and the Nile

Egypt is the gift of the Nile. This is what the Greek historian Herodotus called it in the 5th Century BC. It not only prospers by the Nile, it actually lives by the Nile. If there were no Nile the country would be as barren as the deserts which flank the river. Without the Nile there would be no Egypt.

The Nile is the longest river in the world, with a length of 4132 miles. While in Egypt it flows a distance of 750 miles as a single great river, before entering Egypt it comprises three rivers: the White Nile and the Blue Nile which flow from Lake Victoria and Lake Albert, and the Atbara which originates in the Ethiopian highlands. The White and the Blue Nile unite at Khartoum and the Atbara joins them a little farther north, in fact at the town of Atbara. Up to Memphis the river flows in a valley 5 to 10 miles wide, flanked by cliffs, but near Memphis it enters the Delta and fans out.

The Delta forms a triangle with Memphis as its apex and the Mediterranean coast as its base, roughly from Alexandria to the present Port Said. The cultivated land of the Delta is actually silt deposited over countless centuries by the river, a reddish-grey silt from the Ethiopian highlands which at places in now 50 feet deep. The Flood water – this was before the High Dam at Aswan was built – was held by the farmers in basins for 6 to 8 weeks and

then drained off, leaving behind silt rich enough to grow 2 or 3 crops a year.

The annual flood of the Nile was caused by heavy tropical rains in the catchment area. The timing of the flood was usually so exact that in earlier times, on 19 July, when the star Sirius rises just before dawn, the Egyptians would celebrate the beginning of the flood as their New Year's Day. At Memphis the flood started in early July, reached its peak in early September and fell through October, November and December, with April and May being the period when the river was at its lowest. These timings of rise and fall, however, are more obvious on a graph than on the ground, where generally the period August – September was regarded as the season of high flood.

But while there was dependable regularity in the rise and fall of the river, there was occasionally a year when the flood was delayed or ceased to come altogether. In olden times, with the flood comiing when expected, the Egyptians would rejoice, and believing that it came through the magnanimity of the god of the Nile, would offer him thanks. And when it was delayed they regarded the delay as a result of the wrath of this god. He was clearly a god to be propitiated.

The Muslims knew all about the Nile, but a lot of what they knew was based on legend rather than geographical knowledge. They believed that Adam himself had blessed this river and that it was one of the four rivers of paradise, the others being the Euphrates, the Tigris and the Oxus. (The Nile would flow with honey in paradise). They regarded it as the lord of rivers, one to which God had subordinated all rivers on the earth, and believed that God spoke to the river twice every year. When the time came for its waters to rise, He would say, "Lo, Allah commands you to flow." And the water would rise. And when it had done its appointed task, God would command, "O Nile, go down."[1] And the great river would go down, like a well-trained pet. But the Muslims did not know about the human sacrifice which the Egyptians offered every year to propitiate the god of the Nile.

* * *

1. Ibn Abdul Hakam: p 149; Suyuti: p 21.

It was the month of June, corresponding to the Coptic month of Baoona, in which began the rise of the river.[1] Muslims and Christians and pagans waited anxiously for the life-giving phenomenon. Then a delegation of Coptic elders came to Amr bin Al Aas. "O Commander, our land has this custom", they said, "and without it the Nile will not rise."

"And what is that?" asked Amr.

"When 12 days of this month have passed, we choose a young virgin, take her with her parents' consent, bedeck her with the best of clothes and ornaments, and throw her into the Nile."

To the Egyptians this was a normal yearly practice and they thought no more of it than of sacrificing a ram. The girl was thrown into the river as an offering to the god of the Nile in return for his bounty, and when a few days later the water began to rise the people would assume that their god had accepted the gift and was showing his pleasure. But to the Muslims the idea was a horrible one, worse than cold-blooded murder because it was done to please a god who did not exist and whose false image Islam had come to destroy.

"This cannot be done in Islam," Amr bin Al Aas replied firmly. "Islam has cancelled all that was before it."[2]

The Egyptian were distressed at the decision of the Muslim Commander. They worried about their river and its rise and spread. If the flood did not come there would be no crops in the land and this in turn would lead to famine. And if the Nile withheld its flood for several years Egypt would turn into a desert. The cities would have to be abandoned; the people would have to migrate. But no one dared to question or flout the decision of the Muslim Commander, and the elders walked away in silence.

The month of Baoona passed. The people looked anxiously at the level of the Nile. The rise should have begun, but the month ended with no sign of change. Another month passed, the Coptic

1. Baoona began on 25 May.
2. Ibn Abdul Hakam: p 150; Yaqut: vol 4, p 863.

month of Abeeb, and the fears of the Egyptians turned to despair. Their troubled eyes could discern no rise in the level of the water. The month of Misra began (August) and the sun continued to rise and set, but the Nile flowed low and sullen. The god of the Nile was showing his displeasure, and the Egyptians saw in it the end of their country. Egypt would be destroyed because they had failed to offer the annual sacrifice and all this was due to the coming of the Muslims with their new faith. The people began to pack their bags and prepared to migrate to other lands.

Even Amr got worried. All that they said about the sacrifice of a virgin and the god of the Nile was nonsence, of course, but he knew that nature could be fickle. If the flood were much delayed or did not come this year, it would not only have a destructive material effect upon the country but people would think that Islam was the cause of their suffering. And he would be blamed personally for preventing the sacrifice and thus being the chief instrument of their ruin. Amr wrote in haste to the Caliph and told him all about th situation and the unpleasant prospects.

The vagaries of the Nile may have got the Muslim Commander worried; they could have no effect on the Caliph at Madina. Upon reading Amr's letter he at once wrote on a card:

> In the name of Allah, the Beneficent, the Merciful. From the Slave of Allah, Umar, Commander of the Faithful, to the Nile of Egypt.
>
> If you run by your own will, then cease to run. But if it is Allah, the One and Mighty, who makes you run, then we pray to Allah, the One and Mighty, to cause you to flow.

He addressed a separate letter to Amr bin Al Aas: "You are right that Islam has cancelled all that was before it. I am sending you a card. When you get this letter, throw the card in the middle of the Nile."[1]

The people of Memphis and Babylon and Heliopolis, and other nearby towns and villages, were all packed to go. Their spirits

1. *Ibid.*

were as low and lifeless as the water of the Nile which had failed them. Their despair was total. The time of a Christian feast was approaching – a feast known to the Muslims as the Day of the Cross – and the Copts should have been singing and dancing, celebrating the feast and rejoicing over the fertility of their soil and the ample silt-laden water which was making it ever more fertile. But there was no joy in the hearts of the Egyptians as they prepared to march into a dark and unknown future.

On the eve of the Christian feast Amr flung the message of the Caliph into the Nile. During the night that followed, on one single night, the river rose to its full flood height: 16 cubits, or 30 feet. Allah had commanded the river to flow, and ended once and for all the evil custom of sacrificing a human being to the god of the Nile.

* * *

Then there was the crisis created in Madina by the famine. While the Muslims in Egypt ate heartily and did not seem to have a care in the world, those in Madina were starving. The year of the famine is disputed. There was a famine in late 17 or early 18 Hijri, which Tabari names as the main famine. According to him, during this famine Umar appealed to the governors of the provinces for help in dealing with the famine, and the first to come to the aid of Madina was Abu Ubeida in Syria, while Amr bin Al Aas too did his bit from Egypt.[1] But Abu Ubeida died in early 18 Hijri during the plague of Amawas, and the invasion of Egypt by Amr bin Al Aas was not begun till the end of that year. Most probably there were two famines, the first in 18 Hijri and the second a few years later – both equal in severity. Balazuri gives 21 Hijri (642 AD) as the year of the famine in which the Muslims in Egypt came to the rescue of their brothers in Madina, but there is much variation in the dates of events given by early Muslim chroniclers and this may have occurred in the following year.

The famine affected Madina and the surrounding countryside. Man and beast suffered grievously. Wild animals came into the town to seek food and shelter with men. Grazing animals had no flesh on them and when a man slaughtered a goat for food, the sight of its fleshless bones repelled him. The famine was accom-

1. Tabari: vol 3, p 193.

panied by a severe drought and special prayers for rain were offered by the Muslims. The dust blown by the wind was as fine as ash, because of which this period became known as "Aam-ur-Ramada" . . . . . *the year of the Ashes.*[1]

The Caliph was in despair. He felt helpless, utterly dependent on whatever the governors of the provinces could do to help, And since few provinces were more abundantly blessed by nature than Egypt, the Caliph wrote to Amr: "From the Slave of Allah, Umar, Commander of the Faithful, to Amr bin Al Aas. Salutations. By my faith, O Amr, do you care, when you and those with you eat your fill, that I and those with me are dying? O help! And again, O help!"

It was not long before Amr sent his answer. "To the Slave of Allah, Umar, Commander of the Faithful, from Amr bin Al Aas. O ready! And agian, O ready! I have sent you a caravan of which the first camel will be with you while the last is still with me. Peace be upon you, and the mercy of Allah."[2]

Amr did send a huge caravan of which, it is said, the first camel was in Madina while the last had not yet left Fustat. This must be a poetic exaggeration, of course, considering the distance of a thousand miles between the two cities, but there is no doubt that vast numbers of camels were used by Amr to transport corn and other foods to the Muslim capital. The arrival of the head of the caravan gladdened the hearts of the sorely-tried people of Madina. Umar appointed a few top Companions to see to the distribution of food, and what was done was to give one camel to every household. The family first ate the food which the camel carried, then slaughtered the camel and ate its flesh, and then made such use as they could of the hide of the animal and the sacks in which the food had been packed.

A little later Amr switched the line of supply to Madina. He had the grain carried to the port of Qulzum (Suez) by caravan and

1. *Ibid:* p 191.
2. Ibn Abdul Hakam: pp 162-3. The early Caliphs were proud to assume the title of Slave of Allah – *Abdullah* – and usually referred to themselves as such in their letters.

then loaded into boats for shipment to Arabia across the Red Sea, each boat carrying about 16,000 bushels.[1] No doubt he did this to stop the faithful in Madina from eating up all his camels.

* * *

The crisis was over, thanks to Egypt and to Amr bin Al Aas who had conquered that rich land. Their hunger satisfied, the Muslims of Madina felt a lot better. But in order to make the supply of grain from the granary of Egypt permanent and not contingent upon special efforts made to meet the needs of Arabian famine, the Caliph sought a more effective system of supply and transport than camel-back. Perhaps he too feared that too many Egyptian camels were being eaten up by the faithful. He sent for Amr bin Al Aas to discuss ways and means of solving the food problem.

Amr reminded the Caliph that in days gone by ships used to come to Arabia from Memphis with Egyptian traders by means of waterways then existent. But these waterways had been closed by the Romans and the Egyptians, had got blocked with sand and silt and were finally abandoned by the traders. If the Caliph wished, he could dig up the old canal and send to Arabia boats laden with corn. "Yes, do so," said Umar.[2]

Amr went back to his quarters and told his comrades who had come with him from Egypt about his talk with the Caliph. They were not pleased. "We fear that this arrangement will bring harm to Egypt. It will take the food and abundance of your land to the Hijaz, and your land will be ruined. You should oppose this project and tell the Commander of the Faithful that it is not fair and we do not see how it can be done."

The next day Amr went to take leave of the Caliph. Umar reminded him of their conversation and told him not to forget about the digging of the canal. "O Commander of the Faithful," Amr said, "the canal is completely blocked and it will need heavy expenditure."

1. Yaqubi: *Tareekh;* vol 2, p 154.
2. According to some accounts the Caliph himself suggested the digging of a canal. Ibn Abdul Hakam: pp 163-4.

"By him in whose hands is my life," Umar replied, "I suspect that when you left me and spoke of this to the people of your land, they did not like it. I insist that you dig the canal and make ships sail in it."

Amr was able to think of one more objection: "If the people of the Hijaz get their food easily from Egypt, they will not go upon the holy war."

Umar saw the point but was determined to have his canal. "I will agree to one limitation," he said. "Only for the people of Mecca and Madina will food be brought by sea. Let not more than one year pass before you have completed the task."[1]

There had been a canal linking the Nile with the Red Sea in Pharaonic times. Herodotus mentions that seamen would sail their ships through the length of the Mediterranean, go through the straits (later named Gibraltar), down the west coast of Africa and up its east coast, and from the Red Sea they would sail along a canal to Memphis, and then down the Nile to the Mediterranean. The canal came into the Nile a little below Memphis, through Heliopolis. This canal is known to have been cleared by the Roman Emperor Trajan early in the 2nd Century AD, but had again fallen into disrepair and was not in use for some time before the Muslim conquest.

When word spread in Fustat that a canal was to be dug to connect the Nile with the Red Sea, a Copt came to Amr and offered to show him the alignment of the old one, if the Muslims would exempt him and his family from the payment of the Jizya. Amr agreed to this condition, and the man showed the Muslims the alignment of the old canal.

Work was at once started to clear the canal for a distance of 80 miles from the Nile to the Red Sea at Qulzum (Suez). It was completed within a year and became known as "the Canal of the Commander of the Faithful." It was used for transporting grain

1. Ibn Abdul Hakam: pp 163-5; Suyuti: pp 157-8..

from Fustat to the Arabian coast and remained in operation for several decades before being abondoned in the time of the Umayyads.

But while the canal was being dug, the Muslims were not sitting idle. Amr bin Al Aas had marched on with the bulk of his army for fresh conquests.

11

The Conquest of Barqa and Tripoli

The reader should not imagine that the year 21 Hijri (642 AD) was an entirely peaceful one. In the two preceding chapters we have gone into the story of the construction of the new capital and how the Muslims settled down and solved various problems which arose in connection with this settling down. By and large it was a year of construction, but this construction was carried out not in the absence of war but in spite of war. The military consolidation of Egypt was undertaken by Amr soon after his return from Alexandria, and this consolidation went on while Fustat was being built and the Muslims were making their home in Egypt.

Upon his return to Fustat, Amr bin Al Aas sent out four columns to various parts of the country in order to ensure that no hostile elements remained undiscovered and to bring the population firmly under Muslims control. Of these four columns, one cleared the area of Heliopolis and the region around it, one saw to Fayyum and other parts of Upper Egypt, one went to Dimyat and Tinnees and the fourth dealt with the remainder of Lower Egypt. All these columns carried out their task successfully and without bloodshed, and the entire country came smoothly under Muslim rule upon the same conditions as agreed to earlier by Maqauqas, i.e. the annual payment of 2 dinars per head as Jizya.

This task was completed before the middle of 642. After that Amr bin Al Aas turned his attention towards a region into which the Muslims had never ventured before. He turned to this region

to find something new, to discover new lands and to annex new territory. The region was the country of Nubia, and to this land Amr sent an expedition in the summer of 642 (about the middle of 21 Hijri).

Nubia was a large country lying south of Egypt. It stretched from Aswan to Khartoum and from the Red Sea to the Libyan Desert. It had a king who had his capital at Dumqula, from where he ruled over a hardy, proud and warlike people distinguished throughout history for their martial quality. The Nubians were known as exceptionally good horsemen and archers. Christianised in the preceding century, they were a noble and loyal people living a simple and hard life in a simple and unspoiled land. The Holy Prophet thought well of the Nubians for he is reported to have said: "Whoever does not have a brother, let him take a brother from Nubia."[1]

As commander of the expeditionary force, Amr chose his young cousin, Uqba bin Nafe. Uqba's father was a half-brother of Amr's father, Al Aas. Muslims who know their history will recognise in Uqba the dashing, romantic figure who rode his horse into the Atlantic Ocean and complained that there were no lands left for him to conquer in the way of Allah. Uqba covered himself with glory in Africa, but that happened later and will be described elsewhere in this book. Meanwhile, in Nubia he was in for a rather inglorious experience.

The Muslims got into Nubia and became involved in operations against the local inhabitants. The details of the campaign are not known but it appear to have consisted mainly of skirmishes, haphazard engagements and hit-and-run raids by the Nubians. The mounted archers of Nubia played havoc with the invaders. They were such splendid archers that sometimes a Nubian would call to a Muslim: "Where would you like me to put an arrow in you?" And if the Muslim mockingly indicated the spot he soon had an arrow in it, and he mocked no more.[2]

The Nubians were very fast in their movements. Few of them had armour and those who did, wore very little of it. They were

1. Yaqut: vol 4, p 820.
2. Balazuri: p 238.

tenacious fighters. The Muslim cavalry, mounted on the spirited Arabian horse, was proud of its speed and mobility, but could not equal the Nubian rider who would strike hard, rapid blows and then break contact and vanish before the Muslims could recover their balance and take counter action.

One day the Nubians came in large numbers against the Muslims. Uqba bin Nafe was glad to see them concentrated at one place because now he could get his hands on them. He quickly arrayed his force for the attack and ordered the assault with drawn swords. But the Nubians subjected the Muslims to such a merciless barrage of arrows that the attack had hardly got going when it came to a grinding halt, with 250 Muslims having lost an eye. The Nubians were aiming at the eyes.

At last Uqba pulled out of Nubia. The Muslims had not been defeated by the Nubians. It was just that they could not get to grips with their adversaries and were losing men and eyes without a corresponding gain. And the men were losing interest in the campaign because the poor land of Nubia had very little in it of what could be taken as booty and just did not seem worth fighting for.

So Uqba returned to Egypt. A majority of his men had been wounded in Nubia and many came with only one eye. Because the Nubians would aim at the eyes and usually hit their mark, the Muslims began to call them "the Archers of the Eye."[1] It was not till many years later, when Amr bin Al Aas was no longer the Commander-in-Chief in Egypt, that the Muslims again entered Nubia with warlike intentions.

* * *

Most of 21 Hijri had passed when Amr took the bulk of his army out of its camps and led it westwards into the desert. It was a mobile army, camel-and horse-mounted, that marched with Amr to Africa.

We will not go into the geographical description of the lands and cities which appear in this chapter. They are fully described in later parts of the book which deal with the conquest of Africa

1. Balazuri: p 238; Tabari: vol 3, p 201.

and the Maghrib. Suffice it to say that Africa as the early geographers knew it was the land which lay west of Egypt, its border being near Barqa, and stretched westwards to include the present Tunisia and part of Algeria. Some regarded the real Africa as being even farther west, but in general it covered the coastal zone of the area which is now Libya and Tunisia and Eastern Algeria. And this was the land which Amr aimed at as he marched from Fustat. It was now about the month of Shawwal (September 642).

After one month of marching the army arrived at Barqa, a city 6 miles from the Mediterranean Coast and 50 miles northeast of the present Benghazi. This was Berber country, inhabited by the tribe of Lawata. In a formal and political sense the place was still under the Romans who called it Pentapolis, from which the Muslims extracted the additonal name of Intabulus for the town, but there was no garrison and no arrangements for any kind of defence. The name of Barqa was given to the place by the Arabs after its conquest.

The people of Barqa made peace with Amr. A treaty was signed according to which 13,000 dinars would be paid every year as Jizya by the people of Barqa. With this treaty there were two unusual stipulations: the first that the people of Barqa could sell their sons and daughters as payment of the Jizya, and secondly no tax collector would enter their land. They would themselves see to the payment of the Jizya at Fustat at the appointed time. And the Berbers kept their word in the matter of the payment of the Jizya until events overtook them a few years later.

The year 21 Hijri had not yet ended when Amr sent Uqba bin Nafe to the south-west into the district of Fezzan. Uqba marched to Zaweela, the capital of Fezzan, and all the area between Zaweela and Barqa submitted peacefully to the Muslims. The conquerors found the inhabitants of the area a good people, law-abiding and regular in the payment of taxes. And by order of Amr part of the revenue coming in from the region was spent on the poor of the region. Uqba rejoined the army at Barqa and soon after his return Amr marched along the Mediterranean coast to Tripoli. (See map at endpaper).

In 22 Hijri, probably in the spring, the Muslims arrived at Tripoli and laid siege to the city.[1] Amr put his camp on some high ground which rose east of the city and positioned his forces to block land routes into it. Most of the army was positioned on the east. There was a Roman garrison here and they had free access by sea, and since the Muslims had no siege equipment there was little danger of Tripoli falling to the Muslims. The siege dragged on for two months.

Then one day a party of eight Muslims left the Muslim camp in the morning to go hunting, and went to the area west of the city. On their way back they found it a hot day and began to ride back along the coast. Suddenly they came upon Tripoli from the west, where the city wall met the sea. Here apparently there was an opening and the place was not well watched, because the Muslims were able to carry out a thorough reconnaissance and discovered that no wall or protection of any kind existed between the city and the sea. They could easily get in from this side, where a number of Roman ships rode at anchor.

Then these eight Muslims did something very bold and very unwise. They rushed into the city and before the Romans and the Berbers could know what had happened, they got to the centre of the city, where there was a church, and started laying about them with their swords, at the same time shouting "Allaho Akbar" at the top of their voices. There was panic in the city. A large number of Roman soldiers, believing that a sizable force had got in and more would come, sought refuge on board their ships in the harbour.

Amr heard all this from outside. He was in contact with the fort. Though nonplussed by this new development, he took full advantage of it and launched an attack to scale the wall. We do not know the details of the action that followed, but the Muslims succeeded in getting into the city and joining their eight comrades.

1. Tabari and Yaqut both place the action at Barqa in 21 Hijri and this is not disputed. The next action, Tripoli, is placed by Balazuri in 22 Hijri and by Ibn Abdul Hakam in 23 Hijri. I favour Balazuri in this. It is difficult to see how Amr could have waited a whole year after the fall of Barqa to take Tripoli. It is also inconceivable that he should return to Fustat, a whole month's journey, and then go west again a year later.

The Romans fled in their ships with whatever they could carry while the Muslims took the city as a prize of war.

During the night that followed Amr sent off a fast cavalry regiment to Sabrata, 40 miles to the west. Early in the morning the people of Sabrata had opened the gates of the city and were letting their cattle out to graze. As far as they knew the Muslims were still at Tripoli, and it would be a long time before Tripoli fell and the Muslims moved to Sabrata. Then suddenly the Muslims were upon them. Most of the defending Roman soldiers were killed and the Muslim regiment plundered the town before rejoining the main body of the army at Tripoli.

A few days after the fall of Tripoli and Sabrata, Amr bin Al Aas wrote to the Caliph: "Lo, Allah has given us Tripoli, and it is only 9 days from Afriqia. If the Commander of the Faithful wishes to wage war and conquer it, he can do so."

"No, it is not Afriqia but Mafriqa," replied the Caliph. He was playing with words. Afriqia (Arabic for Africa) and Mafriqa are words with the same 3 letter root, but while the former refers to the land, the latter means one that divides or disunites. And Umar went on, "It is treacherous. No one shall wage war in it while I live."[1]

The Muslims returned to Egypt. The land which they left behind, mostly what is now Libya, was henceforth part of the domain of Islam, linked with the Muslim captial of Egypt by solemn treaties. These treaties would be observed in letter and spirit for a few years, before destiny turned this region once again into a battlefield between Islam and Christendom.

1. Balazuri: p 227, Ibn Abdul Hakam: p 173.

12

Amr and the Caliphs

Umar's generals and governors were always a little apprehensive when they visited Madina. Umar was a hard taskmaster. He was in fact, a hard man – severe, puritanical, demanding, but he was a just man and expected no more of others than he gave himself. He wore clothes of the coarsest material and ate the simplest food; and what is more, he inflicted the same frugal fare upon his family. His unspoiled way of life contrasted with the ostentation and good living to which some of his generals had taken in the far provinces Whenever Umar found someone living it up and deviating from what he regarded as the path of the faithful, he would not spare him, regardless of how high or how low the offender's rank was.

So most officials feared the Caliph. They feared him also because he knew all that went on. Umar had established an intelligence network covering the entire world of Islam – he was the first Caliph to do so – and had his agents in every camp, in every city, on the staff of every senior general. These agents kept him informed of all that went on and there was very little that Umar did not know.

After the conquest of Egypt and while Umar lived, Amr bin Al Aas twice visited Madina. His first visit was in connection with the food supplies of the capital, during which the decision was taken to clear the canal from the Nile to the Red Sea and transport grain by waterway and sea to Arabia. His second visit was some time in 23 Hijri, after his return from the campaign against Barqa and

Tripoli. Following the custom practised at the time by many middle-aged and elderly men, Amr had had his hair and beard dyed. The colour chosen by him was black.

Amr went to the house of the Caliph and exchanged greetings. For a few moments the Caliph looked at his visitor without showing any sign of recognition. Then he asked, "Who are you?"

"I am Amr bin Al Aas."

The Caliph stared pointedly at Amr's dyed beard and then said, "I had sent you off an old man and you have returned today a young man. I insist that you wash it off as soon as you leave here".

It is diffiuclt to understand the reason for Umar's disapproval of Amr dying his hair and beard, because Umar himself dyed his beard.[1] Perhaps there was something about that particular shade or colour.

There was some food lying in front of the Caliph, a large pot on the floor with a thick stew. The Caliph invited his general to join him, which Amr did. As he sat down next to the Caliph, Umar put his hand into the broth and began to stir it. After a little while he raised a handful of food and offered it to Amr. The visitor obediently took the food in his left hand and began to eat it with his right. There were no plates, of course. The Caliph watched intently as Amr ate, and so did his Egyptian comrades who had come with him to visit the Caliph. Knowing what fine food Amr ate in Egypt and how finely he lived there, they were amused at this scene of simple desert hospitality and simple desert table manners.

When they had all left the house of the Caliph, his friends asked him about the food he had eaten. Amr replied, "By Allah, he knows that the food I have brought from Egypt is better than the stew he gave me. He wanted to test me. If I had not accepted it I would have been in trouble with him".

1. Tabari: vol 3, p 268.

This was Umar's way of reminding the governor of Egypt of the simple, pure ways of the desert, and of emphasising the need to avoid luxury and ostentation. But Umar could also acknowledge the military quality of his generals, although he was often reluctant to do so. The day following Amr's visit to the Caliph was a Friday and all Madina had gathered for the congregational prayer of noon. When Amr got to the mosque most people were already there and the Caliph himself stood by the pulpit. He saw Amr and he called aloud to the congregation: "Here, Amr bin Al Aas has come to you. It is not for Amr to walk the earth except as a commander."[1]

* * *

Umar watched his officials like a hawk. He used to keep an account of what they earned, what they acquired in battle and what they should have at any one time. He would be very careful in checking the accumulation of wealth in their hands. And when he found an official in possession of more than was legitimately his, he would take him to task and confiscate the excess. The Caliph was not deterred by the requirements of nicety or politeness but tackled the matter directly and bluntly, with no regard for rank, position or past record. Umar wrote to his officials, "O you officials, you have sat upon the sources of wealth. You have taken what is forbidden and eaten what is forbidden and acquired what is forbidden."

Umar had also heard that Amr had come to possess quite a good deal of wealth, and suspected that his governor had not been entirely honest in handling the property and goods of Egypt. He knew that Amr was not the man to let fine scruples stand in the way of his ambitions. So he wrote to Amr: "You have an abundance of goods and slaves and utencils and animals, which you did not possess when I appointed you over Egypt."

Amr wrote back: "Our land is a fertile land and we get plenty from it."

Umar was not satisfied with this explanation and decided to investigate further. The man he chose to act as inspector was an Ansar by the name of Muhammad bin Maslama, a man of

1. Ibn Abdul Hakam: pp 179-80.

unquestioned integrity. Umar sent him to Egypt with instructions to check the governor's assets and take away whatever was not rightly his. And he wrote to Amr: "I am aware of evil officials. Your letter to me is a letter of one who is worried because of unlawful acquisitions. I have suspicions. I am sending you Muhammad bin Maslama to divide your wealth. Produce before him whatever you possess and excuse his harshness to you. And Salutations."

When Muhammad bin Maslama arrived at Fustat, Amr offered him a gift, which Muhammad declined. This made Amr very angry, but Muhammad was adamant in not accepting it. "If this was a gift from brother to brother I would have taken it," he explained. "But this is a gift which is a gift in appearance but has mischief behind it."

This did not help Amr's temper. The thought that he, conqueror of Egypt, could be subjected by Umar to the humiliating experience of explaining his assets to an inspector made him furious. He blurted out: "May Allah curse the day when I became a governor of Umar, son of Al Khattab. I have seen times when Al Aas used to wear brocade worked with gold while Al Khattab was carrying firewood on a donkey in Mecca."

"Quiet!" Muhammad reproved him "Your father and his father are both in hell; and Umar is better than you. But for today, of which you complain, you would have found yourself tying the legs of goats whose milk would delight you and whose cries cause you distress."

Amr became suddenly humble. "May Allah bless you. Do not tell Umar what I said. Our discussion was in confidence."

Muhammad bin Maslama reassured him on the point. "I shall not say anything of what has passed between us while Umar is alive."[1]

Amr produced an account of his assets. These were checked by Muhammad bin Maslama and found to be in excess of what Amr

1. Balazuri: 221; Ibn Abdul Hakam: p 146.

could rightfully possess. He took away the balance and went back to Madina.

* * *

The checking of the assets of Amr took place some time in 23 Hijri. It was followed by another dispute between the Caliph and Amr. The Caliph was not satisfied with the amount of revenue coming from Egypt. Considering that it was such a rich land, famous throughout history for its wealth, it should be providing much more to fill the coffers of Madina. Umar was determined to get more out of Egypt. He wrote to Amr that in the past Egypt used to provide much more to its rulers than it was doing now, and Amr would just have to make sure that in future a lot more revenue was sent in.

Amr wrote back and explained that Egypt just did not produce more, that people now lived better in Egypt because they were forced to pay less to their masters, and that this was a better arrangement than ruining the land and the people by extracting too much from them. Letters went back and forth between the Caliph and the governor, neither of them budging an inch from his stand, until an exasperated Caliph asked an equally exasperated governor to send him an Egyptian who could tell him all about the revenue of Egypt.

Amr sent a wise old Copt to Madina. The Caliph asked him how it was that in the past the land of Egypt provided its rulers with much more revenue than it did now. The man was quite frank in his answer: In the past the rulers developed the land and saw to its prosperity before taking anything from it; Muslim officials, on the other hand, never bothered about development or prosperity but just took whatever they saw on the surface, "as though they only wanted it for one year."[1]

Umar did not ask his governor again for an increase of revenue from Egypt. But he did take a very important decision regarding the political organisation of the land, which probably had as its cause their disagreement about the revenue of Egypt and the doubt in Umar's mind about the effectiveness of Amr as a tax collector. He split the land in two. There would be a Lower

1. Ibn Abdul Hakam: p 161.

Egypt (north) and an Upper Egypt (south), each a separate province of Islam. Amr bin Al Aas would be governor and military commander of Lower Egypt with his headquarters at Fustat; Upper Egypt would be under Abdullah bin Sad bin Abi Sarh, with his headquarters at Fayyum. The decision came into effect some time in late 23 Hijri (644 AD). It was an unwise decision, and led to troubles which need never have arisen.

Amr had as his province the best part of Egypt, but he was not happy with the Caliph's decision. There was nothing he could do about it. Umar was not a man whose orders could be questioned. So Amr accepted the new arrangement philosophically and continued to rule Lower Egypt for the rest of the year 23 Hijri, while Umar lived.

* * *

Caliph Umar was assassinated on Zul Haj 26, 23 Hijri. A few days later – on Muharram 3, 24 Hijri (November 9, 644) – Usman bin Affan became Caliph. He was to rule for 12 years.

Soon after the change of Caliphs, Amr visited Madina to see the new ruler and pressed him to remove Abdullah bin Sad from Fayyum. Usman refused to do so, giving as his reasons that it was Umar who had appointed Abdullah bin Sad as governor of Upper Egypt and that Abdullah was his (Usman's) foster brother. Amr was very angry about Usman's refusal to accept his demand and declared that he would not return to Egypt until the Caliph had done as he (Amr) wished.

As soon as Amr had left Usman's house, the new Caliph wrote Abdullah bin Sad a letter appointing him Governor of all Egypt. He said nothing about this to Amr.

Upon receipt of Usman's letter, Abdullah bin Sad hastened to Fustat, arriving there just before dawn. He sent word to the Muezzin who would shortly call the faithful to prayers, that he (Abdullah bin Sad) had been appointed by the Caliph as Governor of all Egypt and he would lead the prayer.

Meanwhile, Amr's son, Abdullah, was waiting in his house next to the mosque for the call for the prayer of the dawn. Amr

had left his son as his deputy when he went to Madina, and Abdullah bin Amr would lead the prayer in the Mosque as acting Governor. Then came the call to prayer.

Abdullah bin Amr went to the mosque. As he entered he was informed by the Muezzin about the new governor of Egypt. Abdullah went on to the pulpit, arriving there at the same time as Abdullah bin Sad coming from the opposite direction. The two met by the pulpit.

"This is the result of your plotting and disloyalty," said Abdullah bin Amr to Abdullah bin Sad.

"I did not do this," the other replied. "You and your father had eyes on Upper Egypt. But come, I will appoint you over Upper Egypt and your father over Lower Egypt, and I shall not covet what you have."[1]

Nothing more was said by either of the Abdullahs. The Muslims formed ranks and the prayer of the dawn was led by the new governor of Egypt. Abdullah bin Sad bin Abi Sarh.

* * *

Mecca had been conquered by the Muslims in January 630 (Muharram 8 Hijri.) It was a peaceful operation, almost, with only a little bloodshed in the sector where Khalid bin Al Waleed was attacking the city. As soon as the town was taken, the Ka'ba was cleansed of the presence of the idols which had been placed in it by idol-worshippers over the centuries since Prophet Abraham first built the place. Prophet Muhammad himself, assisted by Ali, smashed the idols to pieces. The holy city was cleared of all vestiges of disbelief, paganism and idol-worship. The infidels of Mecca, who had fought the Prophet and made his life miserable and strained every nerve to destroy him, came in their thousands to submit to him and to accept his faith. It was a historic occasion, a land-mark in the history of religion.

It was almost 8 years before this that the Holy Prophet had fled the city of Mecca as a fugitive, fearing for his life. And now he

1. *Ibid:* p 74.

was back as conqueror and master with all Mecca at his feet and no one to question his political and religious authority. Before entering Mecca the Prophet had announced the names of 10 persons – 6 men and 4 women – who were to be killed at sight, even if they were found taking refuge within the sacred precincts of the Ka'ba. These 10 were what today we would call "war criminals." They were either apostates or had taken part directly or indirectly in the betrayal and torture of Muslims, or damaged the cause of Islam through treachery and falsehood. These men and women, in the opinion of Prophet Muhammad, were the 10 worst enemies of Islam. One of the 10 was Abdullah bin Sad bin Abi Sarh.

Shortly after their migration to Madina, Abdullah had joined the Muslims and professed the Islamic faith. He was a very clever man and won the confidence of the Prophet, and because he could read and write the Prophet appointed him as one of the scribes who would write down the revelations which came to him from God. But Abdullah was not a Muslim. He was actually an infidel and an enemy, acting as agent in the Muslim camp, and took to twisting and distorting the revelations of the Prophet as he wrote them down. He made them appear ridiculous and false. When his crime was discovered, he fled to Mecca and rejoined the unbelieving Quresh in their campaign against the new faith. Since he had been a writer of the Prophet's revelations and thus obviously a man trusted by the Prophet, he was in a good position to malign the personality of Muhammad, the revelations of the Quran and the faith of Islam. And he did not spare himself in doing this dastardly work. This was the reason for his inclusion amongst those who were to be killed at sight.

A day or two after the conquest of Mecca, the Holy Prophet sat in his house with some Companions. Of the condemned men and women a few were still to be found and killed, and one of these was Abdullah bin Sad bin Abi Sarh. Then who should walk into the presence of the Prophet but Abdullah himself, in the company of Usman bin Affan. Abdullah had taken refuge with Usman, who was his foster brother, and remained concealed with him while the Muslims were searching for him all over the town. Usman was one of the top Companions of the Prophet, being among the

very first converts, and thus had a position of respect and veneration in Islam.

Usman and Abdullah sat down on the floor with the others. Some of the Companions thought to draw their swords and cut off the scoundrel's head, but none moved because of the presence of the Prophet and also because he had come with Usman. Then Usman spoke to the Prophet and asked him to spare the life of Abdullah.

The Prophet gave no reply. He just stared at the floor. In the tense silence which prevailed no one spoke or stirred. Again Usman interceded on behalf of his foster brother. Again there was no response from the Prophet, who continued to stare at the floor. Abdullah waited nervously for the decision which would mean life or death for him.

For the third time Usman spoke for Abdullah, and this time the Prophet agreed to pardon him. The foster brothers made haste to depart.

When they had gone the Prophet said to the Companions that he had delayed his answer in the hope that one of them would get up and kill Abdullah. A Companion submitted that perhaps the Prophet could have given a sign to indicate that that was what he wished. Thereupon the Prophet said: "A prophet does not kill with signs."

Abdullah become a Muslim, as did thousands of other infidels in Mecca. When Abu Bakr became Caliph upon the death of the Holy Prophet, he debarred all ex-apostates from taking part in the holy war; but when Umar succeeded Abu Bakr as Caliph he rescinded the ban and thereafter ex-apostates could join the army of Islam fighting in foreign lands. Abdullah too joined the wars.

He was in the army of Amr bin Al Aas from the very first, when the invasion of Egypt began in the end of 639. He was a

brave enough soldier, a good officer and a competent administrator, though there was nothing brilliant or exceptional about him, and did as well as other leaders in the various battles described in this book. And now with the assumption of the Caliphate by Usman, he was governor of all Egypt, starting his rule of the newly-won land some time in the early part of 24 Hijri (early 645 AD).

Abdullah bin Sad bin Abi Sarh had come a long way.

13

The Second Conquest of Alexandria

The Romans in Alexandria who submitted to Muslim rule upon the fall of the city were by no means a loyal lot of people. Those who could get away to Byzantium did so, but more than 150,000 stayed behind. According to the customs of war they were technically captives, as were their womenfolk and children, and the Muslims had every right to take them into slavery. In spite of this the conquerors showed extreme kindness and permitted them to keep their homes, their wealth and their kin. They could live their normal lives and had complete freedom of worship – all in return for two dinars every year from adult males. But the Romans remained a disloyal lot.

They began to hatch plots against the Muslims. Quite soon after the conquest of Alexandria, as early as 22 Hijri, when Amr bin Al Aas was still in Tripoli, Maqauqas wrote to him that the Romans were planning to break their pact with the Muslims. Maqauqas had remained true to his given word and proved a faithful ally to the Muslims. Upon the return of Amr from Tripoli, however, all remained quiet and there was no disturbance of any kind. Amr's prestige and military stature were sufficient to discourage seditious efforts in the province.

In late 23 or early 24 Hijri (644-645) the Christian mayor of Ikhna came to see Amr. Ikhna was one of the coastal districts of Lower Egypt near Alexandria, and its mayor, a Roman by the name

of Talma, was in close touch with his fellow-countrymen in the city. The man had some objections to the payment of the Jizya and asked Amr bin Al Aas something about it to which apparently Amr gave no satisfactory answer. But he said to the mayor; "You are a treasure-house for us. The more you give us the more we do for you; the less you give us the less we do for you."[1]

For some reason this statement angered Talma. He went back to his district and to Alexandria, and after meeting other Romans sailed to Constantinople to put his problem before Constans, grandson of Heraclius, who now sat upon the imperial throne. At about this time Constans received complaints from many others in Alexandria, the basic theme of the complaints being the disgrace of having to pay the Jizya. The letters which he received also told him that the Muslims had left a very small garrison in Alexandria – only a thousand men; and they urged him to come and re-capture Alexandria while it was still vulnerable.

About now the effect of the change of command in Egypt also began to be felt. Abdullah bin Sad bin Abi Sarh (this is how most historians refer to him, but we shall shorten the name to a manageable Abdullah bin Sad) was able enough to run the province and his competence was not disputed. The special thing about his administration was his flair for getting money out of people. Where Amr bin Al Aas had stood up for the people of Egypt against a Caliph as strong as Umar, Abdullah bin Sad sought to oblige his benefactor by getting more out of them for Madina. And since the bulk of the tax-payers were Christians, the oppressive methods of Abdullah pleased neither the Romans nor the Copts. The flames of discontent were fanned by Abdullah's administrative methods, and the fact that the iron hand of Amr bin Al Aas was no longer there to keep the Egyptians in check, encouraged Constantinople to attempt a comeback in Egypt.

It took the empire time to mount the invasion. A large force was concentrated, armed and equipped for the operation, and a fleet of 300 ships was prepared to convey the invasion force by sea to the Egyptian coast. A eunuch named Manuel was appointed

1. Ibn Abdul Hakam: p 176; Yaqut: vol 1, p 166.

commander of the expeditionary force and Talma, Mayor of Ikhna, would act as guide. Manuel's orders were to take Alexandria and then advance and defeat the Muslims in battle at Babylon, after which the entire land would be cleared of them.

In early 25 Hijri (646) the Roman fleet appeared at Alexandria and sailed into the harbour. The Muslims were too few to defend such a large city against such a powerful invasion force, and they seem to have relaxed their vigilance ever since Amr bin Al Aas was sacked. The Romans landed in Alexandria and were joined by the local Roman populace which rose as one man against its Muslims masters. Most of the garrison perished in the fight but many Muslims got away to carry the sad tale to Fustat.

* * *

It was a serious situation that faced Abdullah bin Sad – a major invasion of Egypt which threatened the very presence of the Muslims in the land – but he was never put to the test of dealing with the situation. The Muslims in Egypt were so alarmed by this unforeseen turn of events and had so little faith in their new governor, that they sent a delegation to Madina to see the Caliph. They urged Usman to re-appoint Amr bin Al Aas over Egypt so that he could free the land of the Roman menace. Only he could do it, for only he had the required knowledge of war and experience of high command; and moreover, he was feared by the Romans and thus more likely to succeed against them.

Usman saw the logic of the demand of the Muslims of Egypt. He appealed to Amr to return to his post, to take command in Egypt once again and deal with the Romans. Amr responded like a true soldier. He lost no time in getting back to Fustat as governor and military commander, charged with the mission of expelling the Romans from Egypt and re-establishing Muslim rule firmly in the land. By now the Romans were in full occupation of Alexandria and the surrounding countryside and thad built up a considerable strength of men and material. They had even begun to advance towards Fustat. The Copts by and large stayed away from them, but some living in Alexandria and adjacent districts believed that the Roman sun was rising again and threw in their lot with their former masters.

The return of Amr bin Al Aas gave a tremendous lift to Muslim spirits in Egypt. Everyone prepared for battle with eager anticipation or grim determination, depending upon the individual mood, and Amr got down to planning the operation. Agents informed him about the advance of the Romans and their intention of battling the Muslims in Fustat. Many Muslims were of the view that the Romans should be confined to Alexandria and dealt with in an offensive campaign with all possible speed. Kharija bin Huzafa said to Amr, "Attack them before their strength increases. There is no assurance that all Egypt will not revolt."

"No," replied Amr. "Let them come to me. They will cause trouble to those by whom they pass, and Allah will disgrace some with others."[1]

This was a conflict between two strategies and makes an interesting study for the military student. Amr chose the one of drawing the Romans away from their base, stretching and weakening their lines of communication, and letting Roman indiscipline – which was poor by the standard of the new Muslim ethics – further antagonise the local inhabitants who would then be even happier at the Muslim deliverance. He accepted the disadvantage of losing territory and perhaps the loyalty of some Copts.

Amr let the Romans advance without opposition, merely keeping them under observation. The Romans advanced on the east side of the Nile, i.e. in the delta, rather than on the west or desert side. This gave them certain advantages: as Romans they felt more at ease in the green, cultivated region compared with the desert boundary which suited the Arabs; coming this way they would not have to cross the Nile in the face of Muslim opposition as at Babylon; and this line of advance could place them astride Muslim lines of communication with Arabia, thus putting the Muslims in a terrible strategical position. It was a well chosen line of advance and posed a serious threat to the Muslims.

The Romans advance by road and river, i.e. along the east bank of the Nile and with a flotilla of river craft moving in the

1. Ibn Abdul Hakam; p 175.

water, which they intended to use as warships. They advanced slowly and deliberately. As the Roman army moved from town to town, Roman soldiers drank the townspeople's wine, ate the townspeople's food and plundered the townspeople. The reaction amongst the Copts, as Amr had anticipated, was one of revulsion and anger.

The Romans had advanced about half way to Fustat when the Muslims started their counter move. Amr left Fustat with an army of 15,000 men and advanced along the east bank of the Nile on the road to Alexandria. The Romans came upriver by road and river; the Muslims went downriver by road; and the two armies met in the area of Naqyus (Nikiu, the present Shabshir Tamalai.) We do not know the Roman strength here, but they must have been stronger than the Muslim army or they would not have ventured out of Alexandria.

There was nothing of strategical importance in Naqyus; it was just a large town where the two armies happened to meet. And there was no tactical significance in the ground around Naqyus. It was flat, cultivated, featureless terrain with the Nile on the west and the delta extending to the east. Having met and squared off, the two forces went into camp, in preparation for the Battle of Naqyus. Since there were no tactical features here, the type of battle fought could be fought in dozens of places along the bank of the Nile. The interesting point of this battle was not the use of ground – it was flat and dull – but the unusual tactics employed by the Romans.

* * *

The following day the Muslims deployed for battle on the right bank of the Nile. Their left rested on the Nile and was formed by a cavalry regiment under Shareek bin Sumayy. It was Amr's intention to seize the initiative and attack the Romans and Copts, but he would await the forming up of the enemy before ordering his men forward. The Romans were emerging from their camp and falling into neat formations. But what surprised the Muslims was that large numbers of them were embarking in boats on the river bank. When the Roman preparations were complete, the main body of their army advanced on land towards the Muslims while a sizeable group sailed up the river in boats.

It was when the Roman army was in bow range (less than a quarter of a mile) that the Muslims realised the Roman scheme. The army stopped and started a heavy barrage of arrows against the Muslims while the river group continued to sail till it had reached the Muslim flank. Then this group also opened up with bows and the Muslim found themselves under fire from two sides. Most of them had been sheltering behind their shields against the arrows coming from the land force, but now their left flank was exposed and they could not protect themselves with the same shields from front and flank. (See Map 7) It was a remarkable tactic employed by Manuel the eunuch – an attack from the front with fire power to fix the attention of the enemy; then an attack from the flank with fire power in a manner most damaging to the enemy.

The Muslims suffered grievously from the cross fire. Many were wounded. Amr's horse received an arrow in the chest and rolled on the ground, the rider dismounting hastily from his back to mount another. The confusion increased in the Muslim ranks as more and more of them fell out, wounded by arrows, and no one could tell them how to deal with the heavy arrow fire from two directions. The Romans were clearly superior in this kind of warfare with their better bows with longer ranges and heavier arrows. The Muslim regiment under Shareek bin Sumayy, being at the corner and subjected to direct fire from front and flank, took the heaviest losses. But not knowing what else to do, nor being able to do otherwise, and not being willing to give up the battlefield, the Muslims hung on and took it.

What the Roman general had put into effect was an entirely new form of warfare for the Muslims. It was like a combined operation with land and naval forces acting in concert and bringing maximum fire power to bear upon a single enemy. The ships in the Nile were mobile forts manoeuvring on the flanks of the Muslims with no one to dispute their movement on the water. They were like mobile artillery approaching the Muslims from an unexpected direction while the main army engaged the Muslim front with its own weapons. And by forming a broader base of attack they were able to bring a much heavier volume of fire to bear upon the Muslims. The Romans really had stocked up with arrows, to cause the maximum possible damage to the Muslims before they closed in for the final shock action.

Then the Roman flotilla sailed back from the flank of the Muslims and pulled into the river bank near the main body of their army. Here the soldiers in the boats disembarked and formed up along with the main body, creating a battle formation several ranks deep, which the Muslims saw as "ranks behind ranks."[1] As soon as the formation was complete, the Roman army again started a barrage of arrows, with the missiles landing like hail upon the Muslims.

It was Manuel's intention to take full advantage of Roman expertise in missile warfare by keeping the Muslims at arms length and not letting them close up for close quarter battle, at which the Muslims excelled with their greater courage and stamina. And once the Muslims had been disorganised and unbalanced, Manuel kept them that way and did not permit them to regain their balance. He allowed no letup. So the arrow fire went on and the Muslims were unable to retaliate because of the long range at which the action was being fought.

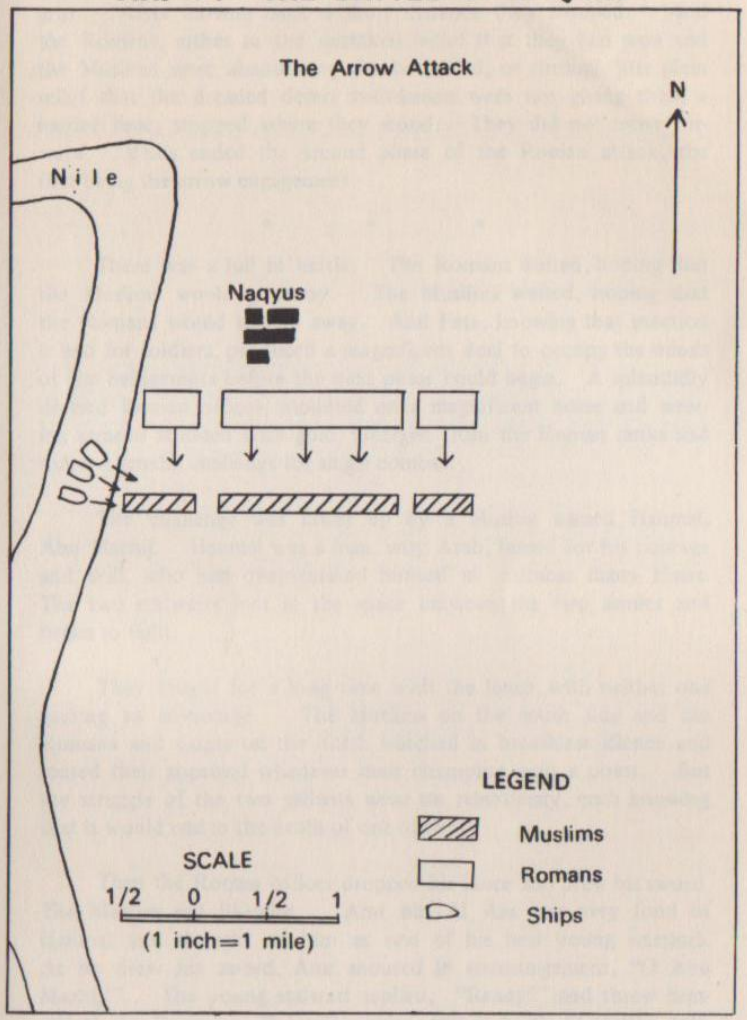
Then, when Manuel thought that the Muslims had been sufficiently softened up and would now be unable to resist a charge, he ordered the Roman army forward to assault the disorganised Muslim ranks. The arrows ceased as the Romans closed up and struck with their short swords at their adversaries. They were in well-organised, well-formed, well controlled regiments.

The Muslims were relieved at the cessation of the deadly hail of arrows, but then came the ground attack. Many welcomed this as a more familiar form of warfare and met the Roman attack head-on with sword and dagger, but the Muslim army really had been softened up by the Roman archers. Some of the cohesion and compactness had been lost.

One Muslim regiment, the cavalry left wing under Shareek, actually broke and bolted and it was a long time before the efforts of Shareek to get them back into action could bear fruit. The rest of the Muslim army fell back. It was not a retreat. The Muslims did not turn their backs upon the Romans and flee from

1. *Ibid.*

MAP 7: THE BATTLE OF NAQYUS I



the battlefield. They just pulled out and away from the Roman grip. After moving back a short distance they stopped. And the Romans, either in the mistaken belief that they had won and the Muslims were abandoning the battlefied, or through just plain relief that the dreaded desert swordsmen were not giving them a harder time, stopped where they stood. They did not move forward. Thus ended the second phase of the Roman attack, the first being the arrow engagement.

* * *

There was a lull in battle. The Romans waited, hoping that the Muslims would go away. The Muslims waited, hoping that the Romans would not go away. And Fate, knowing that inaction is bad for soldiers, produced a magnificent duel to occupy the minds of the belligerents before the next phase could begin. A splendidly dressed Roman officer, mounted on a magnificent horse and wearing armour studded with gold, emerged from the Roman ranks and threw a general challenge for single combat.

The challenge was taken up by a Muslim named Haumal, Abu Mazhij. Haumal was a lean, wiry Arab, famed for his courage and skill, who had distinguished himself in combat many times. The two stalwarts met in the space between the two armies and began to fight.

They fought for a long time with the lance, with neither one gaining an advantage. The Muslims on the south side and the Romans and Copts on the north watched in breathless silence and roared their approval whenever their champion won a point. But the struggle of the two gallants went on relentlessly, each knowing that it would end in the death of one of them.

Then the Roman officer dropped his lance and drew his sword. The Muslim did likewise. Amr bin Al Aas was very fond of Haumal and thought of him as one of his best young warriors. As he drew his sword, Amr shouted in encouragement, "O Abu Mazhij!" The young stalwart replied, "Ready!" and threw himself at the Roman. The two armies, still in battle formation with the western flank of each resting on the Nile, watched the next round of this mortal combat fought with sword and shield.

This also went on for a long time. Both fighters were accomplished swordsmen and neither could gain an advantage over the other. Then the Roman, who was bigger and stronger, launched a furious assault and was able to badly wound the Muslim. At the same time he lunged at his adversary to grapple with him with his bare hands. The Muslim had just enough time to draw his dagger, and as the Roman came on, plunged it into the Romans's throat. The big fellow fell, and after a few moments, lay still.

Some days later Haumal also died, of his wounds. Amr was deeply grieved at the loss and himself took part in carrying the bier at the funeral and sent the body of the departed warrior for burial at Muqattam, the new cemetry of the faithful.

* * *

By the time Haumal had won this grand duel the Muslims were ready for battle again. Shareek with his regiment was also back and had resumed his position on the left of the Muslim front. Amr bin Al Aas gave the signal to attack and the Muslim army of nearly 15,000 men heaved into action. It made a straight, orderly advance towards the enemy. The Romans were prepared for them, and the two armies met with a clash of steel and muscle. General battle was on.

This was the Muslim way of fighting – close-quarter, short-range battle, sword and dagger, courage and chivalry. In the preceding phases, with the battle being conducted mainly with bow and arrow, the Romans had held every advantage; but in this kind hand-to-hand fighting the Muslims were superior. The battle raged for some time with the Muslims attacking fiercely and the Roman resisting stubbornly, but the Romans had lost their advantage with the end of the missile phase. It was now the hour of the Muslim, and as the assault of the desert warriors increased in violence and ferocity, the Roman army broke and fled. (See Map 8.)

Units and groups and individuals fell back. The Muslims came on after the Romans. In this phase of battle no one could excel the Arab of the desert – the pursuit of a defeated foe, and this time the Arabs of Amr bin Al Aas excelled themselves. They pounced upon the receding backs of the Romans and the imperial soldiers stretched themselves to get away from the horror

of the pursuing Arab horse. The retreat of the Roman army, harassed by the Muslim pursuit, did not stop till it had got to Alexandria. Here the imperial soldiers quickly took shelter within the walls of the fort and the Muslims arrived to find another siege ahead of them.

Amr bin Al Aas looked angrily at the walls of Alexandria. He had much to be angry about. At Naqyus he had nearly been beaten by the clever tactics of his opponent. It was only his own heroic efforts which saved the army from a shameful end and then led it into the attack which finally ended with a clear Muslim victory. Perhaps Amr also thought of Caliph Usman, and that never helped his temper.

He was now looking at the walls of Alexandria as he had done five years before. The Romans were just as strong in their fortifications now as they had been then. He would have to go through with it all over again. There would be the same sallies, the same counter-sallies, the same assault against the walls, the same breaching of defences and securing of battlements, and all the vicious, merciless fighting which this kind of warfare entailed. And all this because he had been removed from command and a lesser man put in his place on grounds other than professional qualification.

Amr swore that he would not let this kind of situation occur again, at least not in Alexandria. He swore that if Allah gave him victory, he would demolish the walls of Alexandria so that it would be "like the house of an adultress, accessible from all sides."[1]

* * *

The siege did not last long. The initial phase was one of heavy bombardment by both sides. Roman catapults mounted on the battlements pounded the Muslims whenever they came close to the walls. Amr too had catapults constructed and with these machines he answered the Roman fire boulder for boulder, and then went on bombarding the inside of Alexandria. What actual damage these catapults did is not know.

1. Ibn Abdul Hakam: p 175.

Then, as luck would have it, a citizen of Alexandria approached the Muslims. Named Ibn Bassama, he was one of the gate-keepers of the city and made an offer: if the Muslims would guarantee his safety and the safety of his family and assure him that he would remain in possession of his property, he would open his gate at a time suitable to the Muslims and let them in. The gate which he was in charge of was near the Bridge of Solomon.[1] Amr accepted the gate-keeper's offer and the night and the time for the assault were fixed. On that night and at that time Ibn Bassama would open the gate. It was now about the middle of 25 Hijri (mid 646 AD).

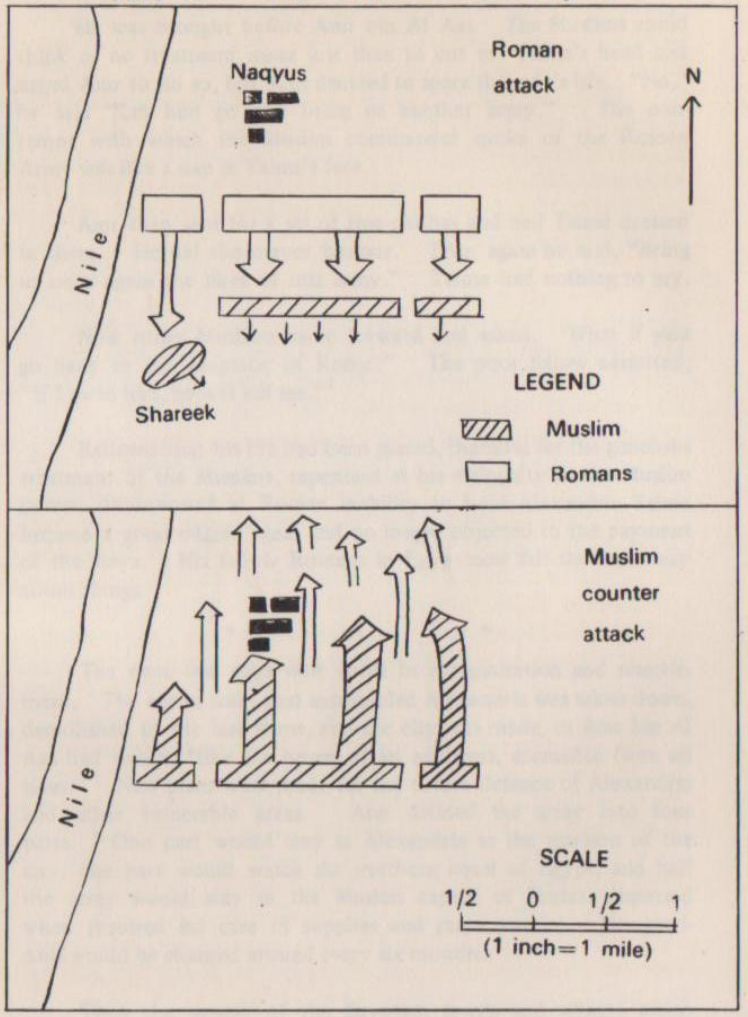
Ibn Bassama opened his gate and the Muslims poured into the city. The Romans who opposed the Muslim entry were cut down in no time and Roman regiments rushing up to hold the Muslim thrust were pushed back. The fury of the Arabs was terrible as they wreaked havoc upon the city. His men were no less angry than Amr bin Al Aas and determined to inflict such punishment upon the Romans that they would never again dare to set foot in Egypt. Many Romans got away in their boats to Byzantium but a large number fell before the Muslim assault. It was a wild and bloody last act in the drama of the second battle of Alexandria. There was much slaughter.

Then someone spoke to Amr about the helplessness of the enemy and the need for mercy. Amr was not by nature a merciful man but the message got through. He at once ordered that the swords be lifted, i.e. the cessation of fighting, and as quickly the army obeyed. At the place where Amr stopped the slaughter a mosque was later built and named "the Mosque of Mercy," to commemorate Amr's act of mercy.[2]

The second battle of Alexandria was over; the city had been conquered a second time. Although large numbers of Romans fell in this battle, mainly in the slaughter inside the city, only 22 Muslims were killed. The Roman general, Manuel the eunuch, having lost the battle, redeemed himself in death.[3] Talma, the mayor of Ikhna, who had been one of the instigators and had

1. There is no trace or knowledge of such a place in Alexandria today.
2. There is no sign of this mosque now.
3. This is the claim of Muslim chroniclers. According to Western sources, he escaped to Constantinople.

MAP 8: THE BATTLE OF NAQYUS II



schemed to bring about the Roman campaign to take Alexandria, was captured by the Muslims.

He was brought before Amr bin Al Aas. The Muslims could think of no treatment more just than to cut off Talma's head and urged Amr to do so, but Amr decided to spare the man's life. "No," he said "Let him go and bring us another army." The contempt with which the Muslim commander spoke of the Roman Army was like a slap in Talma's face.

Amr then sent for a set of fine clothes and had Talma dressed in them. He did the mayor honour. Then again he said, "Bring us once again the likes of this army." Talma had nothing to say.

Now other Muslims came forward and asked, "What if you go back to the Emperor of Rome?" The poor fellow admitted, "If I go to him, he will kill me."[1]

Relieved that his life had been spared, thankful for the generous treatment of the Muslims, repentent at his disloyalty to the Muslim power, disillusioned at Roman inability to hold Alexandria Talma became a good citizen again and no longer objected to the payment of the Jizya. His fellow Romans in Egypt now felt the same way about things.

* * *

The next few days were spent in reorganisation and resettlement. The entire wall that surrounded Alexandria was taken down, demolished to the last stone, and the city was made, as Amr bin Al Aas had sworn, "like the house of an adultress, accessible from all sides." New plans were made for the future defence of Alexandria and other vulnerable areas. Amr divided the army into four parts. One part would stay in Alexandria as the garrison of the city, one part would watch the northern coast of Egypt, and half the army would stay in the Muslim capital of Fustat, dispersed when required for ease of supplies and maintenance. The garrisons would be changed around every six months.

Then the people of the Egyptian towns and villages which had borne the brunt of the recent Roman advance from Alexandria

1. *Ibid:* p 177.

to Naqyus came to Amr bin Al Aas. The Copts lamented how they had been plundered by the Romans, how they had lost all that they had of goods and animals. Amr had the plundered property collected and whatever could be identified by individual Copts as theirs, was returned to them.

Then some of the more intelligent Copts complained of a breach of trust by the Muslims. Referring to the Muslim plan of letting the Romans advance without opposition from Alexandria, they said, "You were not right to do to us what you did. You were required to fight to defend us because we are your responsibility: and we have not broken our pact."

The Copts were right. The Jizya was paid by non-Muslims to earn them exemption from military service and a guarantee for their defence against external enemies. In this case they had paid the tax but the state had not defended them against the Romans, not entirely. Amr was overcome by remorse. "Oh", he said, "I wish I had fought them as they came out of Alexandria."[1]

* * *

Amr bin Al Aas left his Greek slave Werdan as administrator of Alexandria and returned with the bulk of the army to Fustat. He had inflicted a decisive defeat upon the Romans, saved Egypt and restored Muslim rule in the land. He had every right to be satisfied with himself and every right to hope that a grateful Caliph would treat him with honour and leave him in undisputed command of Egypt.

But Usman had other ideas. He was known to be a very kind-hearted man. He wanted his foster brother to get a good job. Moreover, Abdullah bin Sad had been able to get more revenue out of Egypt by his harsh methods than Amr had done in his time. Where Amr had collected 12 million a year, Abdullah bin Sad had upped that figure to 14 million. It was nice to have a tax collector like Abdullah bin Sad if one did not care what happened to the tax-payer, and Usman liked the extra state income from Egypt. Then he got letters from both Amr bin Al Aas and Abdullah bin Sad, each complaining against the other.

1. *Ibid:* p 176.

Usman thought he had the answer. He sent for Amr, and when the latter arrived the Caliph asked how it would be if Amr bin Al Aas remained as military commander, responsible for the defence of Egypt, while Abdullah bin Sad handled the financial side of the administration. Amr was nothing if not quick-witted. He replied, "In that case I would be like the man holding the horns of the cow while another milks it."[1]

Again Amr bin Al Aas was out of a job. Again Abdullah bin Sad was governor of all Egypt. Amr had been there only one month after the reconquest of Alexandria before he was out again. He would not return to his favourite province for 13 years, till the time of Muawia.

Amr was very angry with Usman and bore him a great deal of ill will. He felt deeply the injustice of his removal after the services which he had rendered. He never had anything nice to say about Usman, in fact he said a lot that was not very nice. At times there would be serious altercations between the two, neither of whom had an affectionate regard for the other. Later in Usman's caliphate, when serious discontent had arisen in the world of Islam against his rule, Amr even took to inciting people against Usman.[2]

On a certain occasion, when a great deal of tax money had been sent by Abdullah bin Sad to Madina and it was in Caliph Usman's house, Amr also walked in. In order to drive home the point about Abdullah being a better financial manager than Amr and producing more from Egypt than Amr had done, Usman said, "O Father of Abdullah." Abdullah was the son of Amr and he was often so addressed. "O Father of Abdullah, after you the she-camel in Egypt has been giving more milk."

Amr snapped back: "That is so because you have starved her young."[3]

1. Balazuri: p 225, Suyuti: p 162.
2. Tabari: vol 3, pp 314, 392.
3. Balazuri: p 217; Tabari: vol 3, p 315; Ibn Abdul Hakam: p 161.

PART 2
THE CONQUEST OF NORTH AFRICA

14

Objective Africa

Abdullah bin Sad settled down to ruling Egypt as its governor on behalf of the Caliph. Egypt was all his, a province of the Muslim state. He administered it well, showing intelligence and competence, with a special flair for getting money out of the province for Madina. And his master was well pleased with his governor and foster brother. There was no one to dispute his methods of extracting money from the Copts, for Amr bin Al Aas was now living in retirement on his estate in Palestine and no comparable personality remained in Egypt.

As soon as he had settled down as governor, Abdullah bin Sad began to send raiding parties to the west, to the townships and tribes which were not part of the population of Egypt. These raids were launched in the border region of the west, where Egypt blended with Libya and where the local population was Berber rather than Coptic. The raiding parties had a wonderful time. They captured slaves and cattle and goods, and returned to Fustat laden with wealth, of which one-fifth was sent to Madina as the share of the state and the remainder distributed among the raiders. Abdullah bin Sad was an avaricious man and thought that all this plunder was the surest sign of success. This was a quick way of getting rich, and the soldiers too went into their new role with gusto.

The easy wealth brought in by these raids had the effect of whetting Abdullah's appetite. There was obviously lots more

where this came from – Roman territory west of Egypt – and the prospects of even greater plunder induced Abdullah to write to the Caliph about the matter. He described the situation on the borders of Egypt and asked for permission to launch a major campaign to the west.

In Madina, Usman called a council of war. This was in late 26 Hijri. All the senior Companions were gathered at the council. The latest news about Egypt and the situation on the border were discussed and everyone present agreed that the time had come to launch another major offensive as part of the holy war. As a result of the discussion at this council, Usman took the decision that the Muslims would go into Africa.

Orders were given for a large force from Arabia to march to Egypt, and augmented by the Muslim army already there invade Roman territory in the west. Over the weeks contingents of various sizes from various tribes concentrated for the holy war and soon an army of 10,000 warriors was gathered at Madina; the largest part being from the Qureish and the Immigrants and Ansars. The doors of weapon stores were thrown open and arms issued to those who did not have any, and a thousand camels were provided by the state for carrying those who did not possess mounts of their own.

The soldiers were in high spirits. There was much excitement about the new campaign. The Muslims were full of eager anticipation of the two rewards promised by God to those of the faithful who engage in holy war; victory and the good of this world for those who conquered, paradise for those who lost their lives. There were some fine and noble officers going with the expedition and also one or two not so noble, but most of the leaders were respected and venerated Muslims. There was Ma'bad bin Abbas, a cousin of the Prophet; there was Abdur Rahman, son of the first Caliph of Islam, Abu Bakr; there were two sons of Caliph Umar – Abdullah and Ubeidullah – the first of whom was a virtuous and gallant Muslim. There was Abdullah, son of Zubeir; and there was Abdullah bin Amr bin Al Aas who, in spite of the shabby treatment received by his father, joined the holy war. All these were sons of the first generation of Companions who had formed the army of Prophet

Muhammad and had fought under him in the earliest battles of Islam; and these younger Companions had covered themselves with glory in many campaigns fought in the time of the first two caliphs. Among those not so noble were two brothers viz: Marwan and Haris, sons of Al Hakam, of whom more will be said later.

Before the departure of the expedition from Madina, Caliph Usman addressed the troops. He spoke of their duties as Muslims of the religious obligation of the holy war in the way of Allah, and he wished them well. He ended his speech: "I have instructed Abdullah bin Sad to be good to you. I appoint over you Haris bin Al Hakam until you get to Abdullah bin Sad, whereupon the command will be his".[1]

In Muharram 27 Hijri (October 647 AD) the army filed out of Madina on its way to Egypt. Upon arrival at Fustat it was received with great joy and here another 10,000 soldiers from the army of Egypt joined the force from Madina, bringing the total strength of the army to a full 20,000 men.

With this army, some time in December 647, Abdullah bin Sad bin Abi Sarh marched for the west. His objective was Africa.

* * *

The Arabs called it Afriqia, and believed in the legend that it was so named because it had been discovered and settled by Fariq, brother of Misr bin Beisar, whose story the reader has read in Chapter 2. When Misr was given Egypt as his reward and he founded the city of Memphis, Fariq went and colonised Afriqia.[2] There were one or two other legends also but this was the most commonly accepted one.

But when the Arabs spoke of Afriqia, or Africa, they did not mean the Africa that we know today. They meant the northern belt of Africa bordering the Mediterranean between Egypt and the Maghreb, the latter meaning "west". Africa started at Barqa and stretched westwards up to Bajaya on the Algerian coast, near the

1. Marrakushi: p 19.
2. Ibn Abdul Hakam; p 185; Yaqut: vol 1, p 325.

present Algiers. Some geographers placed its western boundary at Tangier and its eastern between Barqa and Alexandria, at a place called Uqba, thus making Africa even longer, but according to the general concensus it comprised the northern zone of what is now Libya, Tunisia and eastern Algeria.[1] The Romans too regarded Africa as just this, though pushing it somewhat westerly, i.e. from Tripoli to Tangier, which last-named was once called Mauretania. (See map at endpaper). Beyond Africa lay the Maghreb or west. Nowadays when we speak of the Maghreb, we speak of the region of Tunsia, Algeria and Morocco but at the time of which this history is about the Maghreb was regarded as more westerly, i.e. western Algeria and Morocco.

In the chapters that follow all three terms are freely used: *Africa* – meaning the region between Barqa and Bajaya; the *Maghreb* – meaning the region between Bajaya and the Atlantic; and *North Africa* – used in the modern sense to include both these regions.

The northern part of Africa was not barren, as it is now. Today this part of Africa consists mainly of the enormous expanse of the Sahara, more than 3 million square miles of it, with its northern borders formed by the Mediterranean lands and the Atlas Mountains marking its north-western edge in all three Maghreb countries. Africa, even the Sahara desert, was once greener and more populous. It was grassland and forestland.

It had once been cool and wet and until as late as 10,000 years ago, which was soon after the last glacial phase of the Pleistocene Epoch (ice ages) the land was covered with trees. For several millennia after, large parts of it had evergreen forests and Mediterranean-type scrub, while herds of elephant, zebra and ostrich walked across the green face of the land and its flowing rivers teemed with fish. In the sixth millennium BC (early in the Neolithic Period) there was abundant rainfall and good communications existed across the continent. But about 5,000 years ago the good time ended and the land began to go dry. What followed was a transition to aridity – the present aridity – and this transition was complete by 1000 BC. Since then Africa has been as we see it now. with the Sahara as the greatest and most barren desert in the world.

1. Abul Fida: p 122; Yaqut: vol 1, 325.

In terms of human life also the Sahara used to be more active, and long before recorded history was widely occupied. Pre-historic rock paintings scattered throughout the region, particularly in the southern foothills of the Atlas Mountains and the Hoggar and Tibesti ranges, reveal the presence of man living an organised life with buffalo, giraffe and elephant abounding. 10,000 years ago agriculture was firmly established and animals domesticated. In fact, because of the greenness of the region the horse was in common use in Africa, especially before the present aridity set in as is evident from the rock paintings. It was only during the last few centuries before the Christian era, after the aridity had fully set in, that the camel made its appearance in Africa.

* * *

A brief summary of the historical development of North Africa – and it is simple enough – will enable the reader to better understand the cultural and political environment in which the Muslim invasion under Abdullah bin Sad took place. The first inhabitants, those who made the rock paintings and stone artifacts, were Negroes or partly Negroid, obviously from the south, or Sudan. The Muslims used the word Sudan (land of blacks) for the whole desert and scrub belt which stretched along the south of North Africa, from the present Sudan, across Chad, Niger and Mali, to Mauretania, i.e. the belt south of the present Arabic-speaking countries of Africa. But the Negroid people of the rock paintings were eventually overpowered and replaced by Eurasian migrants who were fully established in Africa by 1000 BC. These people became known early as the nation of Libyans, the first historical nation of North Africa.

These Libyans were there when the Phoenicians landed in North Africa in the 8th Century BC and built the city of Carthage, which they called "Kart Hadasht", meaning *New City*, and a great trading and maritime empire was established by them. But after several centuries they came into conflict with Rome and three long-drawn-out wars, known as the Punic Wars, were fought between the Carthaginians and the Roman Empire. It was in the second of these wars that the Romans landed in North Africa near Carthage, in 204 BC, in order to bring Hannibal to battle; and two years later they fought and defeated Hannibal at Zama.

The Romans let go of North Africa again, and again Carthage rose against Rome, in the 3rd Punic War. Again Carthage lost. This time, to make sure that the Carthaginians never raised their heads again, the Romans razed Carthage to the ground, in 146 BC, and made Africa a Roman province stretching from Tripoli to Tangier. The Romans were now here to stay. And in the 4th and 5th centuries AD the settled areas of Africa were partially christianised.

Meanwhile another migration of Barbarians had begun from the east of the Eurasian continent. These were the German tribes, Visigoths, Ostrogoths, etc., large enough to be called nations. These nations first appeared in Western Europe in the 4th Century AD. In the beginning of the 5th Century they crossed the Rhine and a few years later overran most of Gaul and Spain. The Visigoths invaded Italy and in 410 sacked Rome. In Spain the major Barbarian nation was the Vandals.

In Africa the Roman governor, Count Boniface, who had his capital at Carthage, invited the Vandals to come to Africa. Soon after, realising the enormity of what he had done, he withdrew the invitation, but the Vandals came anyway, attracted by the wealth of Africa. In 429 King Gaesaric, or Genseric, led his nation of 80,000 Vandals into Africa and defeated the imperial forces stationed in the province. By 442 the Vandals had established themselves as rulers of North Africa and were recognised by Rome as a sovereign state.

The Eastern Roman Empire based on Constantinople made an attempt to regain Africa in 468 but the attempt failed and the Roman troops were badly mauled by the Vandals. Then Justinian came to the throne at Constantinople and sent Belisarius with 18,000 men to bring Africa back into the imperial fold. In 533 Belisarius defeated and destroyed the Vandal kingdom. The Vandals remained, of course, but as subjects of Rome. Late in the 6th Century, with some reorganisation of the imperial administration, a new appointment of Exarch was created at Carthage, the Exarch being a kind of viceroy ruling Africa on behalf of the Emperor at Constantinople.

This brings us to the time of our history. The father of Emperor Heraclius, who took over the empire in 610, was the Exarch at Carthage, in other words the governor of Africa. Heraclius died in 641, having appointed in the later part of his reign a patrician named Gregory as Exarch or Prefect of Carthage.

After Heraclius there was choas at Constantinople. His two sons wore the imperial purple one after the other, and one after the other lost it. These were Constantine and Heracleonas, the latter being a son of Heraclius from his incestuous marriage with his niece, Martina. In the same year, 641, Heraclius's grandson, Constans II, became emperor and some degree of stability returned to the Eastern Roman Empire. But eventually he had to flee Constantinople and went to Sicily where, in 668, he was killed in his bath by an attendant.

During the reign of Constans II, in 647, in fact only a few months before Caliph Usman sent his army from Madina to Fustat, Gregory broke all links with the empire. He declared himself king and struck coins in his own name, and in this he had the support of the local population of Carthage. So when the Muslims set off from Fustat for Africa in the end of 647, they invaded the realm of King Gregory, stretching from Tripoli to Tangier. It was a powerful kingdom sprawling for 2000 miles along the Mediterranean coast, a land full of wealth and full of soldiers.

* * *

The sands of the desert held no terrors for the Muslims. They were warriors of the desert, born and bred in the desert and looked upon the desert as home. They could live, move and fight in the desert better than anyone else, and this was a great advantage to them when fighting more sophisticated enemies than themselves.

The faithful were again on the warpath, 20,000 warriors, and a very large part of this army consisted of cavalry. Everyone was mounted, on horse– or camel-back, and a large number of soldiers had horses. The soldiers were trained to fight on foot and on horseback, whoever had a horse was a cavalryman as long as the horse was there, and he who had no horse was a foot soldier. The

main body of the army was preceded by groups of light, fast-moving skirmishers, who rode well ahead of the army to make sure that the line of advance was clear. If any enemy were discovered in the territory, he would be disposed of by these skirmishers, who also gathered food and forage as they moved on.

The advance of this army was like the move of an enormous caravan with the loaded camels swaying and swinging gracefully in spite of their ugly shape and clumsy gait. It was a splendid sight. It was also a most unusual move because this powerful army had no line of communication over which supplies had to be moved to it in war. It had no depots, no dumps, no arsenal. It did have a strategical base inasmuch as Egypt was the base from which the conquest of Africa was launched, but the army itself had no logistical base for operations. It did not need one.

The administrative system of the Muslim army had advanced a bit since the simple beginnings of Muslim warfare at Madina, soon after the migration of Prophet Muhammad, but it had remained an unsophisticated and unspoiled military force. The men had no uniform, wore whatever they liked and possessed, and could carry any kind of weapon and armour. There was no standard "army issue" and most of the weapons and armour owned by the soldiers were either purchased or taken in battle. The food of this army marched along with it – herds of cattle and flocks of sheep; it was what nowadays the quarter-masters would call "meat-on-hoof". If the worse came to the worst, the men could live for weeks on a simple diet of dates and water, and they carried the dates as emergency rations. They did not care if their communications were severed, because there was no supply convoy to move up behind them, and if the column were threatened on the move it could leave the route of advance and vanish in the desert in an hour or so, leaving no trace behind.

The women and children of the army shared the hardships of the journey with their menfolk. The families almost always moved with the men. In the first place, campaigns were so long and so much time elapsed before men could return home, that the soldiers preferred to have their women and children with them. In the second place, since Muslim armies were conquering armies and

took over more countries as they marched on, the soldiers with their families often settled down in the conquered lands. Finally, the women and children carried out important administrative services: they helped in pitching and striking tents, in packing and loading the stores for the move; and in battle women performed the role of nurses, dressing wounds and caring for the wounded. When their men died, they buried them. And always, they were ready to fight.

The army crossed the Nile from Fustat to Giza across the Isle of Rauda, and then took the road along the left bank of the Nile. Before reaching Alexandria it left the main road and plunged into the desert, but after some days of marching it hit the Mediterranean coast and then marched along the coastal road. The Muslims went past many places which then had no importance but which would become famous thirteen centuries later as a result of the desert campaigns of the Second World War – El Alamein, Mersa Matruh, Sidi Barrani, Bardia, Tobruk. After nearly six weeks on the move the column arrived at Barqa, the peaceful occupation of which by Amr bin Al Aas has already been described in Chapter 11. The city was known in Roman times as Pentapolis and was the capital of the province of Cyrenaica, but the Arabs named it Barqa. Apparently they called any place Barqa if it was a region of bright stones of many colours, as this was.[1]

Before the Muslim invasion of Egypt, the Romans had as their empires the whole Mediterranean coast from the Red Sea to a little short of the Atlantic. There was Egypt in the east and Africa in the west, which for the Romans began at Tripoli, and in between was Cyrenaica with its capital at Pentapolis. This was neither Egypt nor Africa but a kind of no-man's-land province between the two. After the subjugation of this province by Amr bin Al Aas, it was part of no empire or kingdom but vaguely submitted to the Muslim power at Fustat.

All was peaceful at Barqa. After a few days rest and replenishment of supplies, the Muslims marched on. It was now February 648 (Jamadi-ul-Awwal 27 Hijri). They were headed for the real Africa, the Africa of the Romans ruled by King Gregory, which started at Tripoli, a thousand miles away.

1. Abul Fida: p 127.

15

The Battle of Subetula

The Mulims set off in the direction of Africa. They passed by another famous landmark of the Second World War – Benghazi; and marching along the Mediterranean coast and going round the Bay of Sirte, the column arrived at Tripoli. It was now about the middle of March (Jamadi-ul-Akhir). Tripoli was very much part of the Roman kingdom of Gregory, and no doubt was left in the minds of the Muslims that if they wanted Tripoli they would have to fight for it.

The Muslims wanted Tripoli, and laid siege to it. This was a repetition of the operations of 22 Hijri, when Amr bin Al Aas had come and invested the city. He had found no way in, and because the city could be supplied by sea he had settled down to a long siege. It was only the chance discovery of neglect on the part of the defenders and an opening near the beach which led to a few bold Muslim warriors rushing into the city, which in turn led quickly to its fall. This time again the Muslims laid siege and settled down along the landward side of the fortified city.

It appears that the Romans had not learned the right lesson from their experience of 5 years ago, because the opening to the beach from the side of the city was still there. Consequently the Muslims positioned strike groups on either side of the city near the coast to watch for ships bringing supplies and reinforcements to the city. Somehow their dispositions made the harbour of Tripoli

unusable and fleets coming to the city were not able to use it. Movement of personnel and supplies to Tripoli from the sea had to be carried out across the beaches.

King Gregory of Africa sat in his palace at Subetula, where he had established his capital.[1] (See Map 9). When exactly and why he moved to Subetual is not known. Perhaps he feared counter-action from Constantinople, against which he had rebelled, and Carthage was more vulnerable to a seaborne expedition than Subetula, which was 150 miles south of Carthage and 100 miles from the sea to the east. In his palace he received intelligence of the arrival of the Muslims at Tripoli and their laying siege to the city. He was taken aback by this unexpected news.

His reaction was immediate. The kingdom was threatened and he would have to act fast to defend it against this new danger from the desert. It would take time to get an army together for a major battle against an invading force of 20,000 men, and the Muslim advance had to be delayed until his preparations were complete. In order to keep the Muslims occupied in their siege and make sure that Tripoli did not fall, he sent a reinforcement group by sea to the beleaguered city.

The ships arrived at Tripoli to find that they could not get into the harbour, at least not safely. They had to discharge troops in the water near the beach from where the Romans had to wade ashore with their weapons and equipment. The strength of this reinforcement is not known but apparently it was manageable from the Muslim point of view. As they arrived on the beach, the Muslims strike forces from both sides of the city charged into them. Caught in a vulnerable state, disorganised and tired, attacked from two sides by fresh troops, the Romans were cut to pieces on the beach.

The siege went on. The Muslims had no siege equipment– catapults with which to pound the city or testudos under the protection of which to batter the gates of the fort. They remained vigilant and made sure that no reinforcements or supplies got to

1. The place has also been called Sufetula.

the city from the sea. Abdullah bin Sad also sent scouts in the direction of Subetula to keep an eye on the movement of forces from the west.

Knowing that the relief of Tripoli had failed and that it could fall any day because of lack of supplies, Gregory hastened his military preparations. Soon his army was ready for battle. It was a very large army—120,000 strong according to historians, even Gibbon,[1] but this figure is obviously a gross exaggeration. Such a vast army was not possible in the province of Africa nor was there time to put it together, nor would it be possible to manoeuvre such a force tactically in battle. The actual strength of the Roman army may have been about half, i.e. 60,000 men, and we will work on this estimate in our account of the battle (acknowledging the possibility of error).

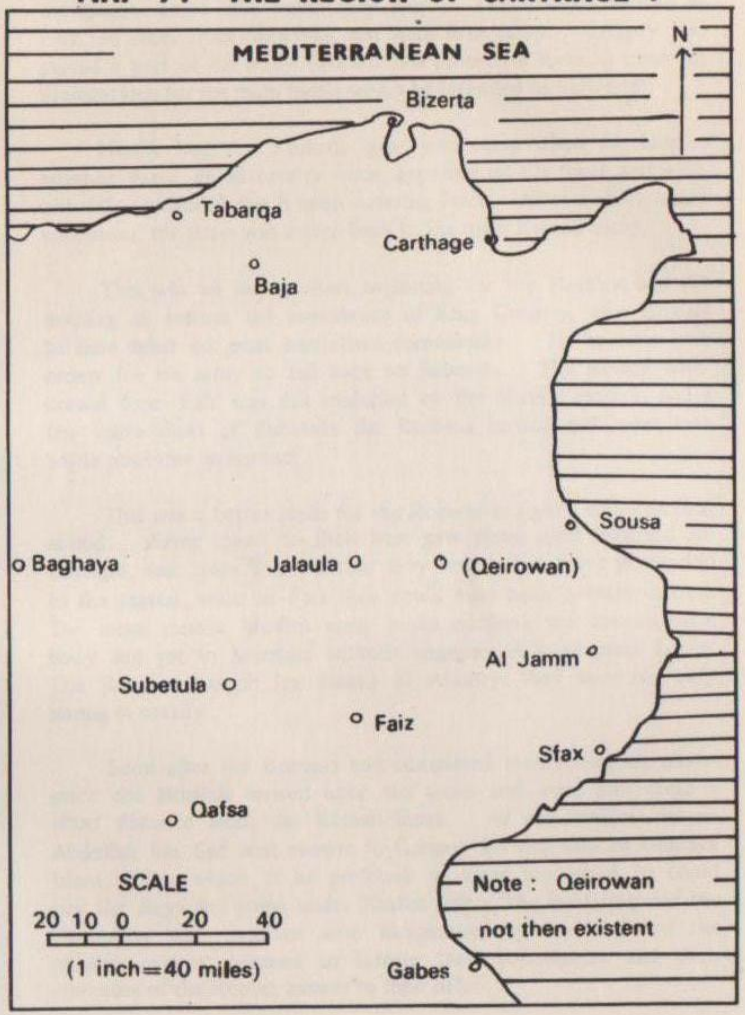
Meanwhile Abdullah bin Sad was getting tired of sitting at Tripoli and watching a garrison which showed no sign of giving in. For all he knew this stalemate could go on for months, wasting precious time while a few marches away lay the richest part of Africa, offering immense wealth to the invader. There would be Roman legions guarding that wealth but they would have to fight in the open, which the Arabs preferred to siege warfare. Consequently, Abdullah raised the siege and marched to the west.

The garrison and the inhabitants of Tripoli were relieved to see the last of the desert warriors. They were, however, in no position to cause any kind of nuisance to the Muslim army by their position in the rear of the Muslims and on the Muslim line of communication. In the first place they lacked the strength and the will to engage the Muslims. In the second place, as explained in the preceding chapter, the Muslims did not depend on supply lines and had no line of supply with which anyone could interfere. So the Muslims marched on, without any fear for their rear. After a journey of several days the army passed through Gabes and made for Subetula.

Ir was about now that King Gregory came to know about the advance of the Muslims. Putting all his forces together, he marched

1. Marrakushi: p 10; Gibbon: vol 5, p 542.

MAP 9: THE REGION OF CARTHAGE I



from Subetula with the intention of opposing the Muslim advance well forward of his capital. His move was inevitably slow, because such a large and heavily-quipped army, with only one road for movement, could not move very fast. The Romans arrived at Faiz, 30 miles from Subetula, and went into camp. Gregory also placed a part of his army forward as a protective force to cover his preparations for the main battle which he intended to fight here.

Hardly had the Romans gone into camp when the Muslim advance guard, an all-cavalry force, appeared on the scene and without delay attacked the Roman covering force. After a short, sharp encounter, the latter was driven back to the main Roman camp.

This was an inauspicious beginning for the Romans and did nothing to restore the confidence of King Gregory, who appears to have been no great battlefield commander. He at once gave orders for his army to fall back on Subetula. The Roman withdrawal form Faiz was not molested by the Muslim cavalry, and a few miles short of Subetula the Romans turned and went into battle positions facing east.

This was a better place for the Romans to fight a major tactical action. Being closer to their base gave them solid logistical advantages, and from this position they could give direct protection to the capital, while at Faiz they could have been outmanoeuvred. The more mobile Muslim army could outflank the Roman main body and get to Subetula without engaging in a set-piece battle. The Roman strength lay mainly in infantry; they were not very strong in cavalry.

Soon after the Romans had completed their retrograde movement the Muslims arrived upon the scene and went into camp a short distance from the Roman front. As per Muslim custom, Abdullah bin Sad sent envoys to Gregory inviting him to embrace Islam; failing which, if he preferred to avoid bloodshed, he could pay the Jizya and come under Muslim rule. The invitation and the alternative were rejected with indignation by the king and the Muslim envoys returned to inform their commander and their comrades of the Roman answer to their offer.

The issue would have to be decided on the field of battle.

* * *

The space between the two camps, which was to become the battlefield, was about four miles from Subetula. The ground had a slight eastward slope, but it was so gradual as to be hardly perceptible and was certainly of no tactical importance. The battlefield was, for all purposes, level, though bordered on its northern side by a low ridge, about a hundred feet in height. This ridge ran east-west, three miles north of the main road, comprising at places a single long feature, at others a broken line of separate small bits of high ground. At its western end it curved into and entered the walled area of Subetula, giving the town's northern edge an elevated position. In other words, the northern wall of the town was built over the ridge. For the purpose of this narrative we will call this ridge North Ridge.

Between North Ridge and the road was a small, round hillock, 50 feet high, a little less than a mile from the road, which we will call Olive Hill because there is a prominent olive tree growing right on top of it. And on the other side of the road there was another ridge (South Ridge), 50 to 100 feet in height, but mainly in the Muslim area. Olive Hill gave excellent observation of the battlefield, as did the western end of South Ridge, and it was a stroke of luck for the Muslims to be in possession of these features.

The two armies formed up for battle, the Romans to the west, the Muslims to the east. The Roman front was six miles wide, lying astride the road, with their left on North Ridge. It was just over three miles forward of Subetula. The Romans adopted a sound disposition which enabled them to effectively cover their city. They made the mistake of not including Olive Hill in their position, but perhaps they were reluctant to let the ground draw them away from Subetula.

Facing them, the Muslims also deployed on a six-mile front with their right on North Ridge and their front a bit ahead of Olive Hill and South Ridge. (See Map 10). They had possession of these two hill features but otherwise the merits of ground were equal for the two armies and the flat, level plain was suitable for the action of infantry and cavalry. We do not know accurately

the proportion of cavalry to infantry in the Muslim army or how the cavalry was disposed, but they appear to have been strong in cavalry and their light, fast-moving horse regiments gave them greater mobility and flexibility.

Both sides were full of fight, full of an eager anticipation of victory, full of a grim determination to win. Both knew that upon the outcome of this contest depended the fate of Africa: either the kingdom of Gregory would survive and prosper or the Muslims would gain another large province and the people of Africa would merge into the rising empire of Islam. If the Muslims lost the battle, it would be another generation, certainly another decade, before they could venture again into the west with warlike intentions.

The Roman army was the more imposing of the two, exulting in its numbers, its equipment and its well-tried system of war. We call it the Roman army because until only a year before it had formed part of the Eastern Roman Empire. The army had Romans and Greeks; it had Vandals – a blond Germanic people who had ruled Africa a little more than a century before; it had Numidians (Numidia was the province to the west of Subetula) who were Berbers and Negroes and sometimes a mixture of the two. And there were the true desert Berbers: dashing horsemen individually brave but collectively more suitable for light operations and raids than a setpiece battle. The Roman army was magnificient to behold.

Against this the Muslims seemed few, only a third in number and less imposing in appearance, but in courage they were far ahead of their adversaries and in faith they were above all mankind. The presence in their ranks of fine officers and noble Muslims – Companions of their beloved Prophet – further strengthened their confidence in themselves and their conviction of God's help in battle. They would win or die; they would return victorious or not return at all.

The Romans and the Muslims were in high spirits not because of their commanding generals but in spite of them. Abdullah bin Sad was overawed by the numbers and splendid organisation of

Gregory's army. His men had little faith in him, and he knew it. He may have thought ruefully how much easier it was to extract taxes from a subject people than to command an army in battle against a powerful opponent. His men thought he was soft, and he was.[1] Having given orders for battle and seen to the forming up and arraying of units and tribal contigents, Abdullah positioned himself at a suitable place behind the army where there was no danger to his person.

Gregory was not in high spirits either, mainly because destiny had at last brought him face-to-face with the Muslims. For the last quarter-century the Muslims had faced enemies in battle, first Arabs, then Romans and Persians, then Egyptians and Berbers, and everyone had fallen before their onslaught. Now they were here, with Gregory and his new kingdom as their objective. And there was something about the Muslim cavalry which dismayed the king. There was a lot of it – horsemen mounted on spirited, prancing Arabian horses which were smaller but faster than his heavy chargers. The sight of the hard faces of the lean, tanned, battle-scarred veterans who rode these horses did not help Roman spirits. Gregory would fight this battle not because he wanted to but because he had to.

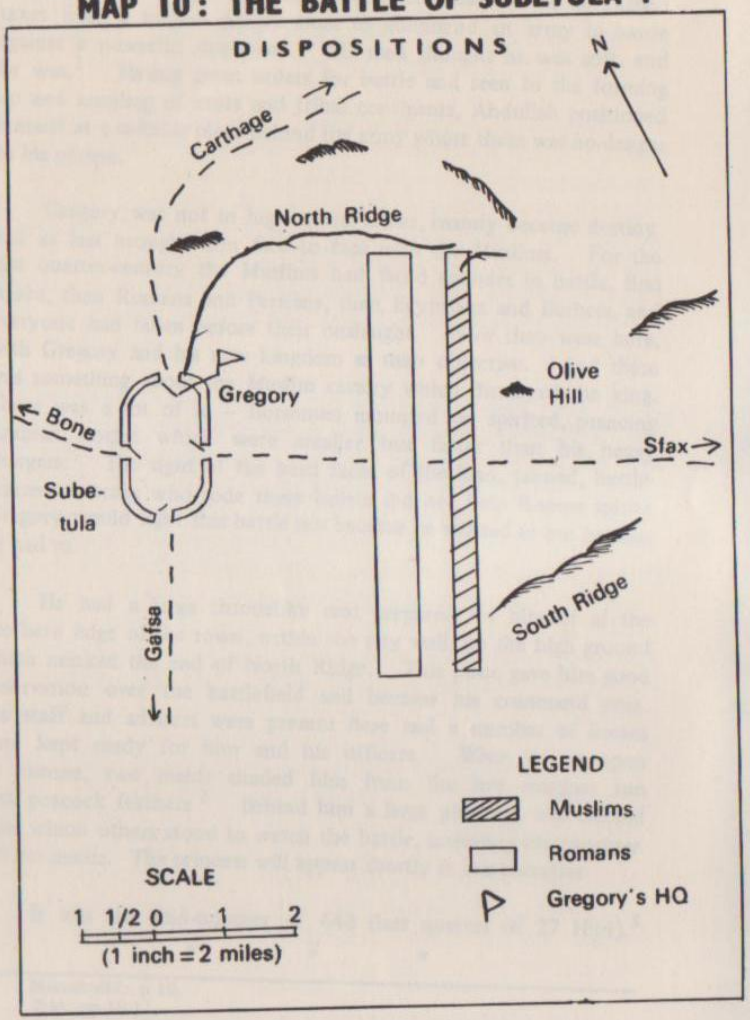
He had a large thronelike seat prepared for himself at the northern edge of the town, within the city wall, on the high ground which marked the end of North Ridge. This place gave him good observation over the battlefield and became his command post. His staff and advisers were present here and a number of horses were kept ready for him and his officers. When he sat upon his throne, two maids shaded him from the hot summer sun with peacock feathers.[2] Behind him a large platform was erected upon which others stood to watch the battle, including his daughter and her maids. The princess will appear shortly in our narrative.

It was the mid-summer of 648 (last quarter of 27 Hijri).[3]

* * *

1. Marrakushi: p 10.
2. Ibid: pp 10-11.
3. The date of this battle is not recorded in history, only the year: 27 Hijri. We know the start of the campaign, and I have worked out the remaining dates from the time and space of movement from Fustat to Subetula, which brings us to mid-summer. This fits in with Gibbon's statement that the battle was fought during the hot weather.

MAP 10: THE BATTLE OF SUBETULA I



One fine summer morning the battle began. We know nothing about the details of the first part of this battle except that there was a lot of fierce fighting; that at dawn the two armies would form up and the fighting would start; that it would go on uniterrupted until mid day, when tired and hot, the soldiers would disengage and return to their respective camps for food and rest. The next day this process would be repeated; and so it went on for several days.

There was no break in the fighting. neither side could gain an advantage. There were no brilliant manoeuvres, just hard, merciless slogging in a frontal clash of arms. Neither side would give in, each hoping that the next day would be better. The two army commanders made no attempt to influence battle by their presence at the front, but preferred the safety of their headquarters in the rear from where they watched the fighting and waited for God's help.

Then, when several days had passed like this, Gregory got the idea that he would gain an advantage over the invaders of his realm if he could get their commander killed. This would not be an easy thing to do and anyone attempting the task would face great personal danger. So he decided to offer his daughter to the champion who carried out the deed. The daughter of Gregory was a beautiful maid, as lovely as she was intelligent and brave. From childhood she had been trained in the art of riding and the use of the bow and the sword; and apparently in this very battle she had been conspicuous not only for her beauty and rich adornment but also her presence in the front line. Whether she did more damage to the bodies of the Muslims than to the hearts of the Romans, we do not know. Her name was Sabiyya.[1]

Gregory sent for her. She came and stood on the platform behind him, accompanied by 40 maids. She was wearing her weapons as well as her fine clothes and jewellery. The king then announced: "By the Messiah and the Christian faith, if any man will kill the commander of the Arabs, Abdullah son of Sad, I shall wed my daughter to him and give him all that she has, her maids and her wealth, and he will have a position near me which none else can

1. Ibn Khaldun: vol 2, p 1005. This is obviously an Arabic rendering of some Greek or Roman name.

hope for."[1] As an afterthought he threw in a hundred thousand pieces of gold.

The offer of the king was soon passed on to everybody in the army and the young soldiers, whether Roman or Greek or African, were excited by the prospects of winning not only a lady of incomparable beauty but also wealth and honour. The King's offer had an excellent effect on the spirits of his army and everyone dreamed of himself being the lucky winner.

The news of this offer also spread in the Muslim army, and the courage of Abdullah bin Sad, never very high, suffered a further decline. He did not relish the idea of being a target of special efforts by the Romans. He countered Gregory's offer by announcing: "By the Prophet Muhammad, on whom be the blessings of Allah, whoever kills Gregory, I shall give him his daughter and all that she has."[2] This was a good one, because it would cost him nothing. In fact this amounted to making Gregory pay for his own death.

Having made this announcement, Abdullah bin Sad withdrew from his command post and, as an extra precaution, went to his tent in the Muslim camp. "to think." This did not have a good effect on the Muslim soldiers who were accustomed to seeing their generals with them in the front rank and looked with contempt upon one who put his own safety above the well-being of his soldiers. But their courage remained high in spite of the absence of their commander.

The two announcements led to harder fighting for the next few days but the pattern remained the same. At dawn the armies would form up and go for each other's throats; there would be a healthy give and take; men would be killed and wounded; and by noon, suffering from fatigue and the heat of the day, the two sides would break contact and retire to the shelter of their camps. The bloody deadlock continued.

Then one morning Abdullah bin Zubeir, who was fighting in the right wing of the Muslim army, was approached by a Berber

1. Marrakushi: p 10.
2. *Ibid.*

chieftain who was an officer in Gregory's army. He had things to tell the Muslims.

* * *

Abdullah was the son of Zubeir, our hero of the Egyptian Campaign. Zubeir had been a hero of many campaigns before that and as a cousin of the Prophet and one of the special Ten Companions he had a high position indeed. Abdullah was born 20 months after the Prophet migrated to Madina and had the distinction of being the first Muslim baby to be born in Madina. Now 25 years of age, he was a fine young man and a skilful fighter, having inherited most of the enviable qualities of his father. He was very well-born, being not only a nephew of the Prophet but also a grandson of Caliph Abu Bakr, whose daughter Asma was Abdullah's mother. And everyone thought he looked just like Abu Bakr.[1]

Abdullah would one day become Caliph at Mecca and rule over much of Arabia for 12 years, in defiance of the Umayyad caliphs at Damascus. Finally he would fall in battle, sword in hand, defending Mecca against the villainous Hajjaj bin Yusuf who actually besieged and attacked the holy city and later crucified the body of Abdullah. But that is outside the scope of this history. For the present Abdullah bin Zubeir was here, in the right wing of the Muslim army, fighting the enemies of Allah in the Battle of Subetula, and at this point in our narrative, talking with the Berber chieftain.

The Berber had had enough of fighting and lost hope of a Roman victory. Wishing to end the battle and at the same time win the favour of the Muslims, he had stealthily crossed the lines to contact the Muslims and was now showing Abdullah bin Zubeir how a Muslim victory could be hastened.

He told Abdullah about the position of King Gregory, his command post, the fact that there were very few guards present with him, his nearness to the northern gate of Subetula which was open and unguarded. Since the battle had consisted over so many days of fierce frontal clashes, there had been no threat to the northern gate and its security had consequently been neglected. If a Muslim group could carry out a cautious, unseen approach and

1. Ibn Abdul Hakam: p 186.

then dash through the gate, it would get Gregory without anyone intercepting it.

The Berber seemed sincere in what he said. Furthermore, he indicated the route which the Muslims should take – a route which lay behind North Ridge – and how to approach the gate through which they would reach the king. In fact he offered to act as guide and lead the Muslims to the gate. As a result of this episode and the action of the Berber against his own commander the northern gate would become known as the *Bab-ul-Ghadr:* the Gate of Treachery.

Within minutes a plan emerged in Abdullah's mind. He moved back from the Muslim right wing and rode to the camp to see the commanding general, who was still in his tent. He went to the tent but was stopped by a guard who stood in front of it. Abdullah asked the guard to be allowed to go in.

"Let him be," said the guard, referring to his general. "He is thinking about your problem. When he has a decision to give, he will send for the people."

"I have to discuss something with him," said Abdullah.

"He has ordered me to keep people away from him until he calls me".

Disappointed at not being able to put his ideas before the army commander, Abdullah bin Zubeir began to walk away. His route took him past the rear of the tent. The rear flap was open so that Abdullah bin Sad was able to see him. He called to him. "Come here!"

Abdullah bin Zubeir entered the tent from the rear. The Commander-in-Chief was reclining on a couch.

"What brings you here, O Son of Zubeir?" he asked.

"I have seen a weakness on the enemy's part," Abdullah bin Zubeir explained. "I hope it is an opportunity Allah has given us, and I fear that it may be lost."[1]

He then described the situation as he saw it: the exposed position of King Gregory and how vulnerable he was. Abdullah bin Zubeir had certain ideas about how to exploit the Roman weakness, what forces would be needed, how to time the operation to get the full benefit of surprise and not only knock out the enemy commander but also create a shock effect on his army which would facilitate its subsequent destruction.

For Abdullah bin Sad this was a gift from heaven. Here was a man telling him how to win the battle with a quick, neat manoeuvre like a surgical operation. And he was prepared to do it all himself, which meant that the army commander would not have to expose his person to danger in order to achieve victory.

He came out of his tent. There were several officers present there, connected with units of the reserve cavalry. They were either liaison officers who would carry his orders or the commanders of reserve units. We do not know the strength of the reserve but we do know that there were several units. Its strength may have been a few thousand. Abdullah bin Sad put the entire reserve under Abdullah bin Zubeir and told them to do what he did and go where he went.

For the rest of the day Abdullah bin Zubeir gave his plans and orders, and the orders were passed on to all concerned. Preparations were made for the next day's crucial action. There was an explosion of enthusiasm, especially among the cavalrymen selected for the special stroke to be launched by Abdullah bin Zubeir. Dismayed and disheartened over the past many days by the inaction and lack of spirit of Abdullah bin Sad, who was their commander only because he was the Caliph's foster brother, the men thought that they had at last found a new leader, a hero who would break the impasse and lead them to victory. What is more, he was a nephew of the Prophet and a grandson of Abu Bakr.

1. Marrakushi: p 11.

Abdullah bin Zubeir was mobbed by soldiers. They knew that he was going to do something very gallant and very risky, and they wanted to share with him the honour and the thrill. So they crowded around him.

Abdullah picked 30 men from the large number of volunteers. These stalwarts would go in with him. He told them what he was going to do and what their job would be. "I am attacking", said Abdullah bin Zubeir. "Defend me against those who attack me from the rear; and I shall defend you from the front, Insha' Allah:"[1]

During the night that followed groups of cavalry were positioned behind the right edge of the Muslim front, covered by the low hills which marked the end of North Ridge. By the morning everything was ready, every unit and group was in position, everyone knew what he had to do. Even the main body of the army would go through the morning's pitiless work as if nothing else were going to happen. Bubbling with excitement, impatient for action, praying for victory, the army awaited the coming of the hour.

* * *

Noon came, and the two armies, locked in combat since early morning, broke contact and separated. They began to pull back towards their respective camp, hardly looking at each other. If the Muslim movement was a bit slower than normal and apparently more reluctant, it was not noticed by the Romans. They just could not get back fast enough. The soldiers headed for their tents, taking off their armour as they went, fainting with fatigue and heat, drawing comfort from the thought that there would be no fighting till the next day.

The king watched this engagement and the mutual retirement to camp. He would stay at his viewpoint a bit longer, watching the battlefield cleared of its dead and wounded and the fallen weapons and equipment collected. Perhaps at this time, he would make some adjustments for the next day's action. A large staff stood at a respectful distance, awaiting their master's orders. A few men of the royal bodyguard stood idly to his left, by the gate of Treachery. Had they known that the gate would be so named because of the blow that was about to befall them, they would have been more watchful.

1. *Ibid.*

Gregory did not see the small, dark mass emerge from behind North Ridge and make for the gate. The pattern of the last many days' fighting had been so fixed that nothing unusual had happened and the king was not looking for anything unusual, nor noticed it. And the delayed presence of the Muslim army on the battlefield helped to divert the king's attention from the rapidly moving group of 30 horsemen led by a bold rider who kept a few lengths ahead of his men. A much larger strength of cavalry was also on the move, behind the cover of North Ridge, but would not be seen until a little later.

The troop of horse raced at a fast gallop through the gate. The king still did not see them, but the few guards standing between the king and the gate quickly formed a line to face the Arab horse. The troop got nearer, with its leader away ahead of his men. As he approached the line of the bodyguard the officer lowered his lance and charged. He broke the line and was in. He saw King Gregory mounted on a grey horse with his staff standing some distance beyond him. On one side stood the princess with her maids, and two of the girls stood nearby with peacock feathers in their hands. It was only now that Gregory turned and saw the Arab officer, but he was still not able to comprehend the meaning of this intrusion.

What happened next is best described in the words of Abdullah bin Zubeir himself:

> "There was open ground between him and me. He thought I was an envoy to him until he saw the condition of my weapons. Then he thought that I was running away to him.
>
> "When I got to him I struck him with my lance. He fell, and I threw myself upon him. . . . "[1]

As Abdullah drew his dagger to cut off the Roman's head the two girls who stood nearby flung themselves upon him in an attempt

1. *Ibid.*

to protect their sovereign, with the result that the first blow of Abdullah's dagger severed the hand of one of the girls. He managed to push them away. Again using his dagger, he cut off the head of King Gregory, and fixing it on the point of his lance, raised it high in the air for all to see.

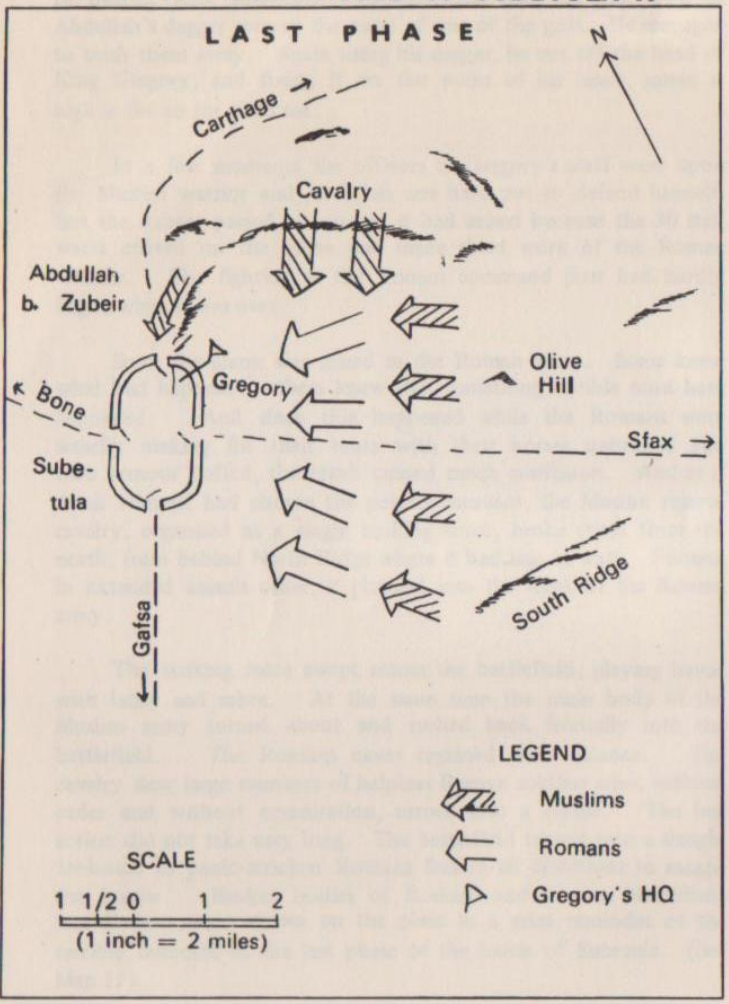
In a few moments the officers of Gregory's staff were upon the Muslim warrior and Abdullah was hard put to defend himself. But the danger passed as soon as it had arisen because the 30 stalwarts arrived on the scene and made short work of the Roman officers. The fighting at the Roman command post had hardly begun when it was over.

Soon the alarm was raised in the Roman army. Some knew what had happened; others knew that something terrible must have happened. And since this happened while the Romans were wearily making for their tents with their horses unbridled and their armour doffed, the result caused much confusion. And as if Allah Himself had chosen the perfect moment, the Muslim reserve cavalry, organised as a single striking force, broke cover from the north, from behind North Ridge where it had lain in wait. Formed in extended assault order, it plunged into the flank of the Roman army.

The striking force swept across the battlefield, playing havoc with lance and sabre. At the same time the main body of the Muslim army turned about and rushed back frontally into the battlefield. The Romans never regained their balance. The cavalry slew large numbers of helpless Roman soldiers who, without order and without organisation, turned into a rabble. The last action did not take very long. The battlefield turned into a slaughter-house as panic-stricken Romans fled in all directions to escape the horror. Broken bodies of Romans and Greeks, Numidians and Berbers were strewn on the plain as a grim reminder of the terrible outcome of the last phase of the battle of Subetula. (See Map 11).

A large number of imperial soldiers, several thousand in strength, survived the converging Muslim attack and made for the city of Subetula, a little to the rear. But they never got into

MAP II : THE BATTLE OF SUBETULA II



the city. Their flight had not ended when a large part of the striking force, having done a fine job on the battlefield, travelled at a fast pace around the flank of the retreating Romans and joined Abdullah bin Zubeir at the north-eastern edge of the town. Abdullah sent off the squadrons without delay to take up positions covering the gates of Subetula and prevent entry and exit. Thus, as the fugitives arrived at the gates of Subetula in the hope of finding refuge within its walls from their pursuers, they were charged in front by the Muslim cavalry. Again there was much slaughter and again the Romans broke and fled in all directions. By the time darkness fell, the battlefield and the city of Subetula were in Muslim hands.

The Roman army of King Gregory had been cut to pieces. The city of Subetula was taken as a prize of war and pillaged by the conquerors.

* * *

On the following day mounted groups were sent in pursuit of Roman survivors of the battle. These fugitives were pursued in all directions over plains and hills, and while some were killed, a large number were captured and brought in. Many Roman officers fought to the last, preferring death to dishonour, but most of the fugitives surrendered without resistance. Abdullah bin Zubeir recalled seeing ". . . . . just in one spot more than a thousand prisoners."[1] One column went to Gafsa (Qafse), a town 50 miles to the south, and sacked it, collecting a great number of slaves and a great amount of wealth. Those of the Romans who survived the battle and the pursuit took refuge in forts well away from Subetula.

Abdullah bin Sad wasted no time in taking charge of affairs. He established his headquarters at a place where the city of Qeirowan would later be built and organized the raiding and collection of plunder. The Muslims were astonished at the vast amount of wealth which came in as booty, mainly gold and silver, but they also accumulated large herds of cattle and flocks of sheep which would feed the army for several months.

As soon as this phase was over, Abdullah bin Sad marched the Muslim army to Carthage and laid siege to the ancient city.

1. Ibid.

After what had happened to the army of King Gregory, the inhabitants of the city were in no mood for battle or even the rigours of a siege, and not many days had passed before they asked for terms. Talks were held. The local leaders offered to pay the Muslim state 300 *qantara* of gold annually as Jizya if the Muslims would go away and not come back again.[1] To this, unbelievably, Abdullah bin Sad agreed. The terms of the treaty were drawn up accordingly and signed. The Muslims would keep whatever they had acquired in the campaign so far, i.e. the plunder and the slaves, and would receive every year 300 qantara of gold, in return for which they would go away from Africa. 300 qantara came to 2,520,000 gold dinars.

This payment was meant for the state and would go to Madina as Jizya. Of the rest of the booty acquired in battle and pursuit, four-fifths were distributed among the soldiers. The horseman got 3000 dinars and the foot soldier 1000 – one of the highest payments ever made in the short history of Islam to victorious soldiers.

Then there was the girl, the beautiful princess offered by both sides to whoever would kill the opposing Commander-in-Chief. Gregory had been killed by Abdullah bin Zubeir and the poor thing had seen the bloody act. But Abdullah had said nothing about it and made no claim for his fair prize. He was a very modest man, not the kind of person who thrust himself forward except in battle. So the people began to wonder who had actually killed Gregory and would receive the prize of beauty. The princess was brought before Abdullah bin Sad, and here she witnessed an argument going on among the warriors present.

"What are they arguing about?" she asked an attendant.

"About the killing of your father," he replied.

"I saw the man who got to my father and killed him," said the girl.

This was conveyed to Abdullah bin Sad, who questioned the girl: "Can you identify him?"

"If I see him I will know him," the princess answered.

1. A qantara is a standard of weight. One qantara equals 100 *ratls*. The Jizya was a poll tax paid by non-Muslims.

After this many young warriors were paraded in front of the princess. When Abdullah bin Zubeir passed by her, keeping his gaze averted, she said, "This is the one, by the Messiah. He killed my father."

Abdullah bin Sad turned to Abdullah bin Zubeir and asked why he had concealed the fact of his killing the Roman king. Abdullah bin Zubeir said, simply: "He for whose sake I killed him would make it known."[1]

Abdullah bin Zubeir got the girl. He did not marry her; just kept her as a slave, and in due course she became the mother of his children. Whether she was still with him when he declared himself Caliph at Mecca in 61 Hijri (681) is not known.

* * *

Someone had to go to Madina to deliver the news of the Muslim victory and describe the spoils taken in the campaign. Abdullah bin Sad made a sound choice of messenger: Abdullah bin Zubeir. There was no one better qualified to give the Faithful an account of how the campaign had been fought, and Abdullah bin Zubeir promptly set off on his journey. He travelled very fast, completing in 20 days a journey over which a caravan would normally labour for three months.

Upon arrival at Madina he went to the house of Caliph Usman and told him briefly how things had gone. Usman asked him to give a full account of the campaign to all the Muslims in the capital, and ordered an immediate congregation in the mosque. When the Muslims had gathered, Abdullah bin Zubeir, with his father present as a member of the audience, narrated the entire story of the campaign from A to Z, including the details of the last glorious day of battle. He spoke with great eloquence and neglected nothing except the part that he himself had played in gaining victory for Islam. As a result of his modesty and reticence to blow his own trumpet, an impression was created in Madina that the chief architect of victory was the Commander-in-Chief, Abdullah bin Sad. This impression was exploited by the Umayyads, of whom Abdullah bin Sad was one, and they spread the word that

1. Marrakushi: p 12.

their man was a great hero and deserved to be saluted as the Conqueror of Africa.

While Abdullah bin Zubeir was thrilling his audience in Madina with the narrative of the Battle of Subetula, the Muslim army was on its way back from Africa. After a journey of nearly three months the army arrived at Fustat, either in the closing weeks of 27 or the early weeks of 28 Hijri, which began on 25 September 648. Africa had been won by Muslim arms, and then abandoned.

* * *

A great campaign had been fought by the Muslims and the best of North Africa conquered. After a long and arduous march they had taken on the major power in Africa and roundly defeated it. It was a great feat of Muslim arms, a splendid jewel in the crown of the Faithful. We have no knowledge of the casualties suffered in the campaign, especially in the bloody battle of Subetula, but it is obvious that a great deal of blood was shed, mainly Roman and African blood. Ma'bad bin Abbas, cousin of the Prophet, fell in battle.

Having killed King Gregory and crushed his army in battle, the Muslims had put an end, though not permanently, to the remnants of the Roman Empire in Africa, after eight glorious centuries of Roman rule. For the first time they had come in conflict with and beaten a German nation, the Vandals who served in large numbers in Gregory's army. All Africa lay at their feet. A little push would have taken them to Tangier and the Atlantic; a new and vast land would be added to the world of Islam in which the law of the Quran would run; the majority of the local population would sooner or later embrace the new faith and the message of Islam would be spread to the western limits of the known world.

But this did not happen. Having done so much, having suffered so much, having shed so much blood and in the end having achieved so much, the victorious Muslim army of Abdullah bin Sad abandoned its conquests and marched back to Egypt. Only the wealth which they brought back and the memories of the campaign bore witness that they had set foot in Africa. The serious reader might question the wisdom of the campaign if it led to nothing better than this.

The answer to this question lies in the fact that the strong hand of Umar was no longer there to guide the destinies of the Muslim state. Umar was averse to venturing into Africa and had forbidden Amr bin Al Aas to do so. But had he been in charge when this campaign was launched, his religious dedication, his political insight and his driving ambition to strengthen the establishment of the Muslim state would have led to better consequences. And his generals, all close Companions of Prophet Muhammad, would out-do their caliph in religious zeal and selfless service to the cause of Islam. They were not only brave soldiers and exemplary commanders, but altogether perfect specimens of the holy warrior, unlike Abdullah bin Sad bin Abi Sarh who had been an apostate and who had once been sentenced to death by the Holy Prophet.

With the departure of Umar, the temptation to acquire wealth raised its ugly head in the Muslim state. No longer was a strict watch kept on the finances of the governors of provinces and the generals of armies. Officers began to take liberties with money which belonged to the state, and were not taken to task. This became evident in this very campaign, and the handling of the booty taken in the Battle of Subetula led to serious objections.

When orderiing the invasion of Africa and sending his 10,000 men from Madina to Egypt, Caliph Usman had written to Abdullah bin Sad: "If tomorrow Allah Most Glorious gives you victory in Africa, then yours is a fifth of the state's fifth of the booty given by Allah to the Muslims."[1]

Abdullah bin Sad remembered the words of the Caliph. When all the spoils of war were in, he distributed four-fifths among the soldier, as per Quranic law, and of the remaining one-fifth which was the share of the state, he kept one-fifth for himself and sent the balance to Madina. And the person he put in charge of the share of the state was Marwan bin Al Hakam, which was tantamount to asking a thief to look after your cash.

His soldiers came to know about this and shortly after, a delegation from Abdullah bin Sad's army travelled to Madina and

1. Tabari: vol 3, p 312; Marrakushi: p 13.

saw the Caliph. They complained against what he had done – taking a fifth of the fifth.

Usman said, "I have given it to him. But I leave it to you. If you agree he shall keep it. If you are angry about it, it shall be taken away."

"We are angry," said the delegates. Usman assured them that the money would be recovered from Abdullah.

Then they asked the Caliph to dismiss him from the post because they did not want him as their commander, after what had happened. To this Usman would not agree. However, he wrote to Abdullah bin Sad, told him how people felt about the matter of the fifth of the fifth, urged him to pay more attention to the goodwill of his fellows, and instructed him to give that fifth away in charity.[1]

Then there was the episode of Marwan bin Al Hakam. He too was an evil man and had been forbidden by the Prophet to enter Madina. Caliphs Abu Bakr and Umar had upheld the Prophet's ban against him, but now he was in again. And he had been put in charge of the state's fifth. He promptly took 50,000 dinars from the fifth for himself. And he was allowed to get away with it! In later years he was publicly accused of the embezzlement by Abdullah bin Zubeir, but he still got away with it.[2]

People began to get rich, and as the years rolled by they got richer and richer. Even some of the high-ranking Companions amassed large fortunes. When Caliph Usman died, he left behind 150,000 gold dinars, 2,000,000 silver dirhams and landed property worth 100,000 dinars.[3]

This was all perfectly legal, of course, because Islam allowed the lawful acquisition of wealth and there was no upper limit fixed for it. Although the Prophet had set an example of frugality and austerity and the first two caliphs had followed that example – as

1. Tabari: vol 3, p 313; Marrakushi: p 14.
2. Marrakushi: p 13.
3. Masudi: *Muruj*; vol 2, p 342.

Ali was later to display it to perfection – the wealth of the senior Companions, including Usman's, was lawfully and honestly acquired. They had not sinned or broken the law.

But people did remember that shortly before his death by assassination, when Caliph Umar had performed the annual pilgrimage along with his son, Abdullah, the two of them had spent 16 dinars on their journey to and from Mecca. Upon their return to Madina, when Umar checked the account, he remarked to his son, "We have been extravagant on our journey."[1]

1. *Ibid:* p 343.

16

War in the Mediterranean

The next three years passed uneventfully in Egypt. Africa continued to pay its Jizya dutifully, as stipulated in the treaty signed after Subetula, and Abdullah bin Sad continued to administer Egypt with efficiency and zeal. Then he turned his attention to the south – the land of Nubia.

The attempt of Amr bin Al Aas to subjugate Nubia in 21 Hijri, after his first conquest of Alexandria, had proved abortive and his expedition had returned to Egypt with nothing to show for its troubles but a lot of one-eyed men. What little we know of that expedition has been described in Chapter 11. Now, ten years later, in 31 Hijri (651-2) Abdullah bin Sad made the second Muslim attempt to bring Nubia under military control.

He led an expedition south to Dumqula (Dongola) on the bank of the Nile, but could not conquer the Nubian capital nor win a military victory. He too found a large number of one-eyed warriors on his hands, as a result of the superb archery of the Nubians whom the Muslims grudgingly called "the Archers of the Eye," because they always aimed at the eye and seldom missed their mark.[1] One of those who stopped a Nubian arrow with his eye was Muawia bin Hudeij, who would later become governor of Egypt and lead several expeditions into Africa.

1. Balazuri: p 238; Tabari: vol 3, p 201.

Since no decision could be achieved. in spite of all the unpleasant fighting, Abdullah bin Sad entered into an agreement with the Nubians to cease operations. It was not a permanent peace treaty; just a pact, according to which:

a. Neither side would commit aggression against the other.

b. Nubians could pass through Egypt and Muslims could pass through Nubia, but neither would stay in the other's land.

c. The Nubians would provide the Muslims with 360 slaves every year.

d. The Muslims would supply the Nubians every year with a given quantity of grain.[1]

The pact was signed at Dumqula, and the Muslims returned to Egypt. The Nubians remained, as before, a simple and backward, but a proud and unconquered people.

* * *

While as an administrator Abdullah bin Sad had proved very effective and appears to have been especially gifted in financial matters, as a general he had not shone too brightly. The Muslim campaign in Africa had ended in success not because of him but in spite of him, and in Nubia the military dividend of his operations had been nil. But strange to tell, at sea he was an altogether different man – vigorous, driving, bold. In all fairness to him, it must be said that while on land he was a lamb, and sometimes a fox, at sea he was a tiger. He was to become the first noted admiral of Islam and the first to win a major naval victory.

But for Muslim operations at sea we must go back a few years to the time of Caliph Umar. In the last few years of his caliphate Syria had consisted of three administrative parts; Emessa and Qinassareen in the north, Palestine in the south, and Jordan and Damascus in the middle. The governor of the middle part of Syria was Muawia bin Abi Sufyan, an able and ambitious man who

1. Balazuri: p 238; Ibn Abdul Hakam: pp 188-9.

was keen to try his hand at naval operations. He wanted to take Cyprus.

He wrote to Umar about the project and sought his permission to lead an expedition to Cyprus. Umar's aversion to seeing his armies crossing water obstacles has already been mentioned in Chapter 9. Moreover, the Muslims had heretofore been land warriors with no experience of naval operations. Umar had no intention of acceding to Muawia's request, but decided to get a second opinion, that of Amr bin Al Aas.

Amr did nothing to reassure the Caliph. In fact he painted a terrible picture of the sea. "O Commander of the Faithful," he wrote. "I have seen a numerous people going upon it overpowered by a few. When it is calm it tends the heart, and when it is in motion it twists the brain. It weakens confidence and strengthens doubt. There is nothing there but sky and water. People at sea are like a worm in a log of wood. If their boat inclines they sink, and if they survive they are dazed."

Upon receiving this letter Umar wrote to Muawia, "We have heard that the Syrian Sea rises higher than the highest thing on earth; and that it seeks Allah's permission day and night to spread over the earth and drown it. So how can I send forces over this terrible *kafir*.[1] By Him who sent Muhammad with the truth, I shall never send any Muslim upon it. The Muslim is dearer to me than the Roman whale. Beware of asking me again!"[2]

Muawia bided his time. Upon the death of Umar, Usman became Caliph. He was a kinsman of Muawia. Usman extended Muawia's authority by making him governor of all Syria, with the result that Muawia became the ruler of the entire western part of the Muslim world, north of Egypt. And Muawia kept pestering Usman for permission to take Cyprus. At last Usman agreed, provided that Muawia took his wife with him and used only volunteers for the expedition.

Muawia first took measures to make his desert soldiers sea-minded. He appointed a man named Abdullah bin Qeis as his

1. Kafir means infidel; used here to mean something terribly wicked.
2. Tabari: vol 3, p 316.

admiral and launched several small expeditions at sea. We do not know what mission Abdullah was given, but he led fifty expeditions, probably to raid the coast of Asia Minor and attack Roman craft, and he lost not a single man or vessel. On the last of these expeditions, however – a raid against a Roman port Abdullah bin Qeis was killed.

The expedition to Cyprus was launched in 28 Hijri (which began on September 25, 648), and was commanded by Muawia in person, though we have no knowledge of the number of ships or men involved Cyprus was siezed without opposition. The Cypriots submitted to the payment of the Jizya – 7000 dinars a year – and the Muslims returned to Syria, leaving Cyprus in peace. What is unusual about the tax transaction is that the Cypriots would pay an equal amount to Constantinople, and this was an open arrangement. Both sides knew what the other was getting and it was understood that neither would interfere.[1]

This was the first major naval expedition in Islam. It does not make an admiral of Muawia because there was no naval battle, not even a minor engagement at sea. The honour of fighting the first naval battle of Islam goes to Abdullah bin Sad bin Abi Sarh.

* * *

It took the Romans some time to recover from the defeats suffered by them at the hands of the Muslims in Egypt. Their attempt to regain Egypt in 25 Hijri had got off to a promising start but thanks to the resumption of command by Amr bin Al Aas, it ended in failure and disgrace. Two years later Gregory revolted in Africa, and this, a stab in the back by their own kind, was a very painful loss. It took the empire time to recover, but recover it did. And the naval expeditions launched by Muawia, culminating in the capture of Cyprus, drew Roman energies into ship-building and maritime operations.

The Romans built a large fleet and got down in right earnest to preparing men and equipment for the sea. This led to a sense of naval rivalry and mutual apprehension. The Muslims now understood that with their command of the sea, the Romans could land

1. Tabari: vol 3, p 318.

a large force at any spot on the Syrian, Egyptian and African coasts. And the Romans knew that by taking to the sea the Muslims would pose a direct threat to all imperial lands, even Constantinople.

In response to the Roman challenge, Abdullah bin Sad also built a fleet at Alexandria. The initiative taken by Muawia in the matter of Cyprus had opened the door to the sea, and Abdullah showed more openness of mind than most Arab military commanders of the time. He had a better grasp of naval potentialities than others did. But the fleet was little more than a means of transport-tation, as indeed was the Roman fleet, and naval battles in this period of history amounted to nothing more than land forces fighting a land-type battle at sea, using the ship as a vehicle and platform. The Muslims had their soldiers to do the fighting and engaged Copts to do the rowing and other seaman work.

The first naval clash between Rome and Islam took place in 31 Hijri (651-2). It was probably an attempt by the Romans to land troops on the Egyptian coast but very little is known about this action. Abdullah bin Sad sailed out to meet the Roman fleet and after some fighting the Romans were repulsed. The Muslims gained valuable experience from this battle, which was given the name of Asawida. The next major naval action, known as Zat-us-Sawari, was fought three years later, in 34 Hijri.[1]

* * *

We have no knowledge of the exact location of the Battle of Sawari. We know from Zahabi that it was fought near the coast not far from Alexandria, and he is the only historian who mentions its general location. There is some confusion also about the composition of forces. According to Tabari, Muawia himself accompanied the fleet with his army of Syria, marching by land,[2] but other historians have said nothing about the participation of Muawia in this battle. It seems unlikely, too, because such coordination between military forces of two large provinces of the Muslim state without a central command would be extremely difficult,

1. There is confusion about the year of "Sawari". Ibn Abdul Hakam places it in 34 Hijri; so does Zahabi; Marrakushi places it in 31; and Tabari accepts both while favouring the earlier date. Those who place it in 31 probably confused it with the Battle of Asawida.
2. Tabari: vol 3, p 340.

if not impossible. Other versions, excluding Muawia from this operation, are more likely to be correct.

The Roman fleet consisted of over 500 vessels, filled with sailors and fighting troops and commanded by Emperor Constans in person. It was the largest fleet that had ever put to sea since the advent of Islam. The Romans sailed across the Mediterranean to make another attempt at Alexandria, with the ultimate aim of recovering their Egyptian empire, but Abdullah bin Sad came to know what the Romans were up to and was ready for action when they came.

The Muslim fleet consisted of just over 200 vessels. We do not know the strength of the force embarked on these vessels but half the force available was placed in the ships and half moved as a land force along the coast, under the command of Busr bin Abi Artah, who was later to become quite a famous sailor. Abdullah bin Sad had disembarked his naval half from the ships and they were encamped on the coast, with the other half some distance away, when warning was received of the approach of the Roman fleet. He got his men embarked quickly, but they were only at half-strength because Busr bin Abi Artah was elsewhere. However, Abdullah with his force was ready to receive the Roman fleet, and if necessary would follow his enemy wherever the enemy went and force an engagement upon him.

As the Roman fleet appeared over the horizon, the Muslims were impressed by its size and order but remained eager for battle. The two fleets came closer. Then a strong wind arose and it blew against the Muslims. Because of the wind the Muslims dropped anchor, and the Romans followed suit. The wind stood all night.

In the morning the wind dropped and the two fleets raised anchor. As was the custom of chivalry practised on land the Muslims offered to fight the Romans on land or at sea, as they wished. The Romans disdained fighting on land and chose the sea. And the battle began.

Once the Roman fleet was within bow range, the Muslims opened up and maintained a steady barrage of arrows. It had

little effect on the Roman ships, which drew closer. Then the arrows were used up and the Muslims began to hurl large stones at their adversaries, but this too had no visible effect. Then the Roman fleet came right up into physical contact, and the warriors went for each other with sword and dagger.

One source describes succinctly how the Roman Emperor saw the battle. He kept in the rear, some distance away, for his own safety, and every now and then a messenger would come from the front line in a boat and tell him what was going on. After the start of battle, when the messenger arrived in his boat, Constans asked, "What is the enemy doing?"

"They are fighting with bows and arrows" replied the messenger.

"Then Rome has won," said the Emperor.

After a little while the messenger made his second trip and again Constans asked, " What is the enemy doing?"

"Their arrows are finished and they are throwing stones at us"

"Then Rome has won," said the Emperor.

The messenger went back to observe the battle and after a while came up again to make his report. Again Constans asked, " What is the enemy doing?"

"Their stones are finished," replied the messenger. "They have tied their ships together and are fighting with swords."

"Then Rome has lost," said the Emperor.[1]

Rome had not lost, not for a long time. In fact, initially it was the Roman fleet which launched the attack and heated up the battle. Both fleets tied their ships together with several ships forming a group, and in some cases there was a tying arrangement

1. Ibn Abdul Hakam; p 190.

for the masts also. This, and the fact that everyone was mixed up in a wild melee of ships and sails, gave this battle its name: Zat-us-Sawari. . . . . *the Battle of the Masts.*

As the Roman fleet attacked, groups of Roman vessels assailed corresponding groups of Muslim ones. It appears that the Muslim formation and front line organisation was not very orderly and the Romans broke the Muslim line in several places. This led to hard and vicious fighting with men leaping at each other and using sword and dagger in an orgy of killing, crew assaulting crew and men assaulting men. This is just the kind of fighting the Muslims loved, because in hand-to-hand combat the hardy Muslim warriors, veterans of many battles, were superior to their relatively softer opponents. The Romans were slaughtered in huge numbers but they fought on, and for a long time the battle hung in the balance.

After a good deal of fighting at close quarters, the Romans accepted defeat. They broke contact and pulled back out of the battle area and sailed away to the north. The Muslims returned to the nearby coast, where they spent several days before marching off to Alexandria and then back to Fustat.

It was a great victory for Muslim arms. The Faithful had ventured into the sea, which had hitherto been the exclusive province of the Roman Empire and which held terrors for many of them who had never taken their feet off firm land. They had taken on the most formidable navy of the time, one more than twice as strong as their own, and beaten it squarely. A very large number of Romans had been killed and a very large number wounded among those who survived to return home. The Muslims too took heavy casualties in this battle but even in terms relative to their strength, their casualties were light compared with those of the Romans.

There was such ferocity in this battle and such was its bloody harvest that the nearby shore became the scene of a horrible spectacle for the next few days. Waves of the ocean lapping the shore carried blood, the blood overspreading the water, and incoming

waves threw bodies upon the beach until the beach was covered by human corpses.[1]

Not for a long time would the Eastern Roman Empire dispute with the Muslims the command of the Mediterranean in a major naval engagement. The Romans had been beaten as soundly at sea as they had been beaten on land.

* * *

The Battle of Sawari (Masts), fought in 34 Hijri (654-5), was a feather in the cap of Abdullah bin Sad, an honour fairly won. It was a first, for no Muslim general before him and put on an admiral's hat, figuratively speaking, faced a powerful Roman fleet at sea and decisively defeated that fleet. But it was his last major achievement. He did not have much longer to go, and the year that followed the Battle of the Masts, i.e. 35 Hijri, was a momentous and very sad year for Islam.

Most of the year was a period of unrest in the Muslim world. There was discontent in the provinces and widespread grumbling among the people. All this led, in the later months of the year, to grave civil disorder and rioting in the capital itself. The rioters were not the people of Madina but Muslims from Kufa, Basra and Egypt; and they were not hooligans and looters but normal citizens, who demanded the ouster of Caliph Usman, accusing him of incompetence and corruption. The Egyptian Muslims working against Usman at Madina were led by Muhammad, son of the late Caliph Abu Bakr. The violence of the disorder reached its climax on Zul Haj 18, 35 Hijri (May 17, 656) when the venerable and pious 82-year old Caliph was assassinated by two of the rioters. Muhammad bin Abi Bakr was present with these two men but did not himself strike a blow.

One of the major causes of this tragedy was a person who has been mentioned in the preceding chapter: Marwan bin Al-Hakam, the fellow who took 50,000 dinars from the state's share of the spoils of Subetula and was allowed to get away with it. Some time after that battle Usman appointed him as his principal adviser or secretary, and he began to wield enormous influence in

1. Tabari: vol 3, p 340.

matters of state. He was always there to advise Usman, and seldom was his advice beneficial for Islam or for Usman. He was a thoroughly treacherous and evil person with a malevolent, Rasputin-like influence over the Caliph, but for whom Usman's rule would not have ended in such internal chaos and his own violent death. Marwan, of course, got away with it, and with a lot more besides.

The death of Usman was followed by several days of lawlessness in Madina. There was a complete absence of order and control. Then Ali bin Abi Talib became Caliph and all citizens of Madina came and did obeisance, except for the clan of Usman (Umayyads) and a few chiefs who remained seated on the fence. Ali was the only one of the great Companions big enough to accept the burden of the caliphate, knowing that whoever did so would be accused of having a hand in the murder of Usman; knowing also that he could have been the very first caliph of Islam.

Soon after taking over as Caliph, Ali dismissed Abdullah bin Sad from his post and appointed another man as governor of Egypt. Abdullah left Fustat and went to live at Asqalan in Palestine, and that was the end of his career. It was the end of his life too, because some time in 36 HIjri, Abdullah died at Asqalan. He had never been a great man – as a Muslim, as a general or even as a person – and his passing made not the slightest difference to anybody.

17

The Last Days of Amr bin Al Aas

Ali, himself the noblest, purest and bravest of Muslims, was not destined to know peace in his five-year rule. There was civil strife and indiscipline in the provinces. Revolt raised its ugly head. Ali was faced with problems which had their origin in conditions which arose in Usman's time; in fact the seeds of the civil strife and disorder were sown by the clannish Umayyads who dominated Usman's administration. Ali had to deal with the consequences, and his caliphate turned out to be a series of civil wars and revolts.

The first revolt was by Talha, Zubeir and Ayesha, who ganged up against Ali. The first two were top-level Companions, the third a widow of the Prophet. Their revolt led to the Battle of the Camel (named after the animal atop which Ayesha herself rode in battle in an armoured litter) near Basra, at which Ali thrashed the rebels and crushed the revolt. The dead of this battle were hardly cold in their graves when Muawia raised the standard of revolt, or rather brandished it, for he had been in revolt all the time.

Muawia was the son of Abu Sufyan, Chief of the Umayyad clan and leader of the infidel Qureish in their battles against Prophet Muhammad. Father and son submitted to Islam upon the conquest of Mecca by the Muslims, when there was nothing else they could do, but continued to place their Umayyad connection above Islam. Muawia later went to fight in Syria, where he proved himself to be a good general, an able administrator and a wily politician. Late in the time of Umar he was appointed governor of a good part of Syria, and early in the time of Usman he was appointed governor of all Syria, with his capital at Damascus. His naval expeditions have been described in the preceding chapter.

Of the chiefs who rose in revolt against Ali, Muawia was the most cunning and most slippery, though in the matter of these virtues even he acknowledged the superiority of Amr bin Al Aas. Amr was now living on his estate in Palestine, which province he himself had conquered before his Egyptian campaign. To him Muawia turned for help against the rightful caliph.

For some time Amr was on the horns of a dilemma, torn between moral right and wordly gain. He confessed to his son, Abdullah: "With Muawia is this world but not the hereafter; with Ali is the hereafter but not this world." Abdullah urged him to reject Muawia's invitation, but Amr gave in to wordly temptation. He travelled to Damascus and agreed to become Muawia's right hand man, in return, after victory, for the governorship of Egypt, to be his for life.

Ali and Muawia faced each other at Siffin, on the right bank of the Euphrates in present north-eastern Syria. After a long, hard and bloody battle, fought in Safar 37 Hijri (corresponding to July 657),[1] the army of Muawia was about to collapse when Amr saved it with a masterly trick. He snatched a hard-won victory from Ali's grasp and left him with the bitter taste of a wasted battle. In this Amr was indirectly assisted by the treachery of the Kufans,[2] who formed the bulk of Ali's army and who virtually mutineed just when victory was in sight.

The brilliant, if highly unethical part played by Amr in support of Muawia, both in battle and in the political activity which followed, would take a book to describe, and commentaries on these actions would fill several volumes. This has earned him the approbrium of a large part of the Muslim world which regards him as an arch-devil, but for whom there may have been no schism in the world

1. Some historians place this battle two months earlier.
2. The people of Kufa, in Iraq.

of Islam. But this book is a work of military history. It deals with Amr bin Al Aas as a soldier and is not concerned with questions of political and religious ethics. We leave Amr to the judgement of Allah, Who is the Best of Judges.

The star of Muawia continued to rise and he established himself as a stable and independent ruler. Eventually, partly by guile, partly by assassination, partly by military action, he was able to wrest Egypt and the Hijaz from Ali, while the latter was béset by revolt, disorder and civil strife within the rest of his domain. Thus the world of Islam was split in two. The rightful caliph, Ali, ruled over the eastern half consisting of Iraq, Persia and the area to the north and east, with his capital at Kufa. The western part comprising Syria, the Hijaz, Egypt and the west was ruled from Damascus by Muawia, who would later be acknowledged as the first Umayyad caliph.

But Egypt had not yet become part of Muawia's domain when Amr came forward and claimed his pound of flesh. And he got it, except that he would himself have to take physical possession of the land because it was still in the occupation of Ali's forces. Fighting and winning battles was child's play to Amr; so he marched with an army of 6,000 men to Egypt, where he came face to face with Muhammad, son of Abu Bakr, who was Ali's governor in Egypt. In the battle that followed Amr not only defeated and killed Muhammad but also had him sewn into the skin of a donkey and burned to ashes.[1]

This happened at Kaum Shareek, where Amr's advance guard had fought an action against the Romans in Amr's first advance to Alexandria. And it happened in late 38 Hijri (second quarter of 659 AD). With the successful conclusion of this action Amr bin Al Aas became once again Governor of all Egypt.

* * *

Amr was back in his beloved land, from which he had been parted for 13 years. He was 68 years of age but still fit and active. He looked upon Egypt as his own child and felt protective towards

1. Masudi: *Muruj;* vol 2, p 420. According to Tabari (vol 4, p 79) and Balazuri (p 229), this terrible thing was done by a subordinate of Amr, one named Muawia bin Hudeij.

it. It was his greatest conquest, the finest jewel which he had acquired in a long and glorious military career. He now ruled the land with efficiency and affection, seeing to the well-being of its people more than any governor had done before him. When Muawia complained that he was not getting enough revenue from Egypt and that he needed more money, Amr flatly refused to give him more. He would say, "The governerate of Egypt is equal to the rest of the caliphate."[1]

Amr had come a long way since the days of his disbelief. He had once been among the most fearsome enemies of Islam; by his own assertion, the worst Islam-hater.[2] He had strained every nerve to damage the cause of Islam, had taken part with the idol-worshipping Qureish in the persecution of Prophet Muhammad and his handful of followers, in the days when they were only a handful. When in the 9th year before the Migration, the Prophet sent some of the Muslims to Ethiopia to escape persecution and seek refuge with its Jewish ruler, known as the Negus of Ethiopia (Najjashi to the Muslims) Amr had followed them with a few blood-thirsty friends with the intention of killing them. He knew the Negus, had visited him before in the course of trade, but the Negus refused to let him carry out the dastardly deed. The harassed Muslims felt safe and secure under the benign protection of this Jewish monarch.

At last, unable to bear what had become increasingly unbearable, the Prophet had migrated to Madina in what was later to be numbered as the first year of the Hijra. And in the following year a series of battles started between the Muslims at Madina and the Qureish of Mecca, the first being the historic Battle of Badr. In these battles Amr bin Al Aas played a prominent and enthusiastic role, the most important one being Uhud, where he commanded the infidel cavalry. But the cause of Islam continued to prosper and the Muslim state went from strength to strength. The greatest effort of the Qureish was launched in 5 Hijri, but at the Battle of the Ditch this effort petered out and the Qureish, who had gone out of Mecca like lions, came back to Mecca like mice.

1. Ibn Abdul Hakam: p 192.
2. *Ibid.* p 251.

Amr still hated Muhammad and the new faith which he was spreading, but he was intelligent enough to see that with the failure of the Qureish at the Ditch, the scales had been tipped in favour of the Muslims. His shrewd perception left him in no doubt that the star of Islam would continue to rise and the fortunes of the infidels continue to decline. So, as he himself related later, he got a few friends together, told them how he saw the situation and suggested that they go to Ethiopia. "If the Qureish win we will return," he said. "And if Muhammad wins we will stay with the Negus, for it is better to be under the Negus than under Muhammad."

His friends agreed to join him in this journey. They made preparations. They collected a large quantity of hides and skins to give as a gift to the Negus because Amr knew from past experience that this was the commodity which the Negus valued the most from Arabia. When their preparations were complete they travelled to Ethiopia. This was some time in 7 Hijri.

Upon nearing the palace of the Negus, Amr saw a man emerge from the palace whom he knew. This was a Muslim named Amr bin Umayya and had been sent by Prophet Muhammad as an envoy to the Negus. Amr bin Al Aas at once made up his mind that after he had given his gifts to the Negus, he would ask him to let him have Amr bin Umayya so that he could kill him. This killing of an envoy of Muhammad would raise Amr's stock in the eyes of the Qureish.

Amr bin Umayya came out of the palace and Amr bin Al Aas went in. The Negus was delighted to see him. "Welcome, O my friend," he said. "What gift have you brought me?"

"O King," Amr replied simply, "I have brought you gifts." Amr advanced and offered his gifts, which were accepted and much admired.

Then Amr bin Al Aas took up the matter of Amr bin Umayya "O King, I have seen the envoy of Muhammad at your door, and he is our enemy. Give him to me so that I can cut off his head, for he is the envoy of a man who is an enemy unto us."

On hearing this the Negus got very angry. He stretched forth his arm and struck himself on the nose with his fiat. It was such a hard blow that Amr thought he must have broken his nose, and wished the earth would open and swallow him up, just to get him away from the infuriated king.

But the king controlled himself and calmed down. Then he spoke firmly to Amr: "You are asking me to give you the envoy of a man to whom the Angel Gabriel has come even as he had come to Moses, so that you may kill him!"

Amr at once took a mollifying attitude. "O King, if it is so, then so be it. He has received the same Angel Gabriel as came to Moses."

"Yes", the Negus continued, "and by Him in whose hands is the life of the Negus, woe to you, O Amr. Listen to me and follow him. By Him in whose hands in my life, he will prevail; he and those who follow him against all others, against those who oppose him, even as Moses prevailed against Pharaoh and his armies."[1]

This espousal of the cause of Muhammad by a Jewish king who had never even met him had a profound effect upon Amr bin Al Aas. He came out of the palace of the Negus a changed man. He was sure now that Muhammad was a true apostle of God, and that to accept Islam was the right thing to do.

Amr and his friends returned to Mecca. From there he set out for Madina and was pleasantly surprised to be joined on the way by Khalid bin Al Waleed and one other, who were travelling to Madina with the same intention. They went to the Prophet and submitted.

This happened on Safar 1, 8 Hijri (May 31, 629).

* * *

Then there was the assassination attempt against Amr soon after his return to Egypt as governor. What happened was that three misguided Muslims (may their memory be cursed!) took it

1. *Ibid:* pp 252-3.

upon themselves to rid the world of Islam of its three leading personalities: Ali – the rightful Caliph at Kufa, Muawia – the successful rebel ruling the western part of the Muslim world from Damascus, and Amr bin Al Aas – governor of the largest and most prosperous province of Islam. The three would-be assassins thought that the removal of these three leaders from the stage would lead to the emergence of a new leadership, which might be better. It was a neat, cold-blooded, well-calculated, diabolical plan – one which offered every prospect of success.

The plotters fixed a day, a Friday in the month of Ramazan, for the elimination of all three leaders. These leaders would no doubt come to the mosque to lead the congregational prayer, and by such act they would be known. As each of the leaders stood before the congregation, one of the assassins would assault him and kill him. It was as simple as that. The tasks were divided by the three among themselves, and the date of the crime having been fixed, they left Mecca for their respective destinations. Abdur Rahman bin Muljam went to Kufa, Hajjaj bin Abdullah went to Damascus, and Amr bin Bakr came to Fustat.

Only the noblest of the Muslims was actually killed. On the day of the crime – Friday, Maharram 17, 40 Hijri (January 24, 661 AD) Ali, Commander of the Faithful, was mortally wounded. He died three days later. In Damascus, the assassin's knife could do no more than cause a gash in Muawia's buttock (and apparently it was a big one) before he was overpowered. Muawia got away with a deep flesh wound. In Fustat the attempt misfired altogether.

Amr bin Al Aas was not well that day. He was suffering from indigestion and could not leave his house. So he nominated his Chief of Police to lead the prayers in his stead. This man was none other than our hero of many battles in the Egyptian Campaign – Kharija bin Huzafa, the *hazar mard*, the equal of a thousand. As Kharija took his place in front of the congregation and faced Mecca, Amr bin Bakr (also known as Haruri) leapt at him and stabbed him to death. The assassin had never seen Amr before and believed he had killed Amr. He only realised his mistake after the bloody deed was done.

But he was a truthful fellow. When taken before Amr, he said to him, "By Allah, I sought none but you." Amr replied, "But Allah did not seek me."

The would-be assassin of Amr was also, apparently, a simple fellow, and the words of Amr seem to have made quite an impact on him. He kept saying. "I wanted Amr and Allah wanted Kharija."[1]

When making his confession, Haruri revealed the whole plot of the three assassins to kill Ali, Muawia and Amr on this day and believed that the two other leaders were already dead. He was told that he would be executed for murder, and upon hearing this the fellow burst into tears. He was asked if he was surprised at this punishment for such a crime, and he replied: "No, by Allah: I am only sad that my two comrades have succeeded in killing Ali and Muawia while I have failed to kill Amr."[2] He was executed without delay.

Amr realised that he was alive only because of his upset stomach which had kept him away from the mosque where the assassin waited. Whenever he discussed the event with friends, he would say, "Never has my stomach done me any good, except on that day."[3]

* * *

After Ali, his eldest son Hassan became caliph in the eastern part of the Muslim world and everyone swore allegiance to him. But the people of Kufa proved treacherous to him, as they had been to his father, and when Muawia took the offensive against him, they turned upon him as enemies. He was actually attacked and wounded by them.

Hassan decided that he had had enough. The Holy Prophet had said that after him the true caliphate would last 30 years. In Rabi-ul-Awwal, 41 Hijri (30 years, to the month, after Prophet Muhammad's death) Hassan abdicated in favour of Muawia, who

1. Ibn Abdul Hakam: p 105.
2. Masudi: *Muruj*; vol 2, p 429.
3. Ibn Abdul Hakam: p 105.

now became ruler of the entire Muslim state. But the true caliphate was over. Henceforth Muslim rulers, though calling themselves *Caliphs* and assuming the title of *Commander of the Faithful,* would in reality be *Sultans* – whether Umayyad or Abbasid or Fatimid.

* * *

All was going well in Egypt. Amr bin Al Aas had ruled the province for more than four years. He was now 73, and in the 43rd year of the Hijra the month of Ramazan was coming to an end. Then the icy wind of death began to blow; the icy hand of death stretched forth to get him. Amr lay in bed. He knew that his time had come, and his eyes filled with tears.

His son Abdullah, who stood beside him, was astonished to see tears in the eyes of his illustrious father, whom he had always known as a hard and fearless man. He asked, "O Father, is it fear of death that makes you so?" "No," replied Amr, "it is what is to come after death".

Amr was a troubled man; he had a sense of guilt. There is no record in history of any statement made by him to inform us of what actually pricked his conscience, but it was probably the part he had played in the conspiracy against Ali, whom he knew to be the true and rightful caliph. Some of his words support this view. In fact Ali had warned him, in the days when Amr was planning his most devilish tricks against him: "I know of a day when you will regret this, and that is the day of your death. You will wish you had not supported hostilities against a Muslim and not taken a bribe against justice."[1]

Abdullah tried to comfort his father. He reminded him of his services to the Prophet and his conquests in the way of Islam. Amr listened quietly to his son. When Abdullah had finished, Amr said, "I have known three occasions in life, on any one of which, if I had died, I know what people would have said.

"Allah sent Muhammad, on whom be the blessings of Allah and peace, and I was the most in hating what he brought. I

1. Tabari: vol 4, p 51.

wanted to kill him. My hostility to the religion of Allah became so strong that I went across the sea to the Lord of Ethiopia, seeking the blood of the Companions of the Messenger of Allah. If I had died then, people would have said, 'Amr has died an idol-worshipper, an enemy of Allah and of His Prophet, one of the people of hell!'.

"Then Allah cast Islam into my heart and I went to the Messenger of Allah. He stretched his hand towards me for obeisance, and I gripped his hand. I said, 'Am I swearing allegiance on the understanding that my past sins are forgiven? I will then know that I start in Islam without sin.' The Messenger of Allah replies, 'O Amr, Islam wipes out whatever was before it of error, and the Migration wipes out whatever was between it and Islam.'

"If I had died then, people would have said, 'Amr has become a Muslim and has migrated with the Messenger of Allah. We hope for much good for Amr with Allah.'

"Then I achieved high command and there was mischief. I fear this the most."

He had nothing more to say, for the moment, and Abdullah took his leave. Some more time passed. Death took another step towards Amr. He knew that this was the end. He sent for Abdullah, who hurried to his father's side. The son knew, as did the father, that it was Last Post for the old soldier.

"O my son," said Amr, "when I am dead, bathe me yourself, and when you have bathed me, put some camphor on my body. Wrap me in three garments and bind me with my waistband, for I am a warrior. When you have finished take me quickly. Let no mourner follow me, and no torch. Put me in my grave and cast earth evenly over me, and know that you have left me alone and afraid.

"When you have buried me, pray over me, and stay long enough to sacrifice a camel and distribute its flesh."

Then Amr turned to prayer. He addressed his Lord and sought forgiveness and mercy.[1]

He died on the day of the Id-ul-Fitr: Shawwal 1, 43 Hijri (January 4, 664). The Nile into which he had flung the epistle of Caliph Umar, challenging it to withhold its flood, was in the process of falling, after Allah had commanded it to flow and then to stop. The Fustat which he had founded as the new capital of Egypt was now a bustling town.

Abdullah bin Amr led the funeral prayer for his father. Then they buried him at the foot of the Hill of Muqattam, near Fajj.[2] The grave was right by the road on which people travelled to Mecca and Madina, and as the Muslims passed by his grave they would pray for him.

Amr died a very wealthy man. According to Masudi, the wealth he left behind consisted of 325,000 gold dinars, 1,000 silver dirhams, grain worth 200,000 dirhams, and an estate in Egypt valued at 10 million dirhams.[3] This is probably somewhat exaggerated.

But the fact that one of the great captains of history had passed from the realm of the living to the realms of the dead made no difference to the world. Muawia appointed Amr's son Abdullah as governor of Egypt. And the world went on as if nothing had happened.

1. *Ibid:* pp 180-2, 251.
2. Today there is no sign of any place called Fajj.
3. Masudi: *Muruj:* vol 3, p 32.

18

Back to Africa

Muawia ruled as Caliph at Damascus. After the abdication of Imam Hassan in 661, there was none left to contend with Muawia or dispute his authority. Things settled down in the Muslim world. Muawia had no high position in Islam – in fact as a Muslim he rated rather low – but as a ruler and administrator he was shrewd and able and his rule was marked by political and administrative success.

In Egypt, after the death of Amr bin Al Aas in 43 Hijri (664 AD), his son Abdullah was appointed as governor. This suited Muawia for the time being. Abdullah knew Egypt and understood its problems. He was an able and respected officer and his loyalty to the Caliph had never been in doubt. He did well as governor and ruled Egypt for 4 years before being relieved, but during his tenure as governor there were no operations and no events of historical significance took place in Egypt or nearby. The forward-most garrison of Islam stood at Barqa, under the command of Uqba bin Nafe, about whom much will be said in subsequent chapters.

In Carthage, too, everything was quiet and everyone was contented with his lot. After the revolt of Gregory and the shake-up which always follows such a revolt, and after the bloody battle of Subetula and the brief siege and peaceful surrender of Carthage, things had returned to normal. The people selected another man

to be their king, a Roman citizen named Hubahiba (obviously an Arabic rendering of some Roman name). Nothing much is known about this man but he proved a good ruler and administrator for the entire domain of Africa, consisting of the provinces of Mauretania, Numidia, Carthage and Tripolitania. On the whole the people of Africa were happy with the new situation and recovering rapidly from the wounds of war. They lived virtually as an independent people. They even organised a new military force for defence, and, ironically, the enemy they had to defend themselves against was their own ex-empire.

Constans II, grandson of Heraclius, had lain low for a long time, licking his wounds after the naval battle of Sawari and getting over the shock of his defeat. The Roman navy had been driven out of the Eastern Mediterranean. But slowly and steadily the empire recovered its balance and re-established its naval and military strength, though not to the same degree as before. They were reluctant to fight the Muslims by land or sea, but they were quite prepared to take on other enemies, especially their own rebellious subjects.

The loss of Africa was a wound which had not yet healed. The disloyalty of Gregory who broke away from the empire and declared himself an independent king, the bloody defeat inflicted by the Muslims upon the Roman army at Subetula, the willingness with which the population of Carthage surrendered to Abdullah bin Sad, and the 300 *qantara* of gold paid to the Muslims by the Africans. . . . . the cumulative effect of all this rankled like a thorn in the imperial side. Instead of feeling sympathy for the losses suffered by his African subjects and coming forward to relieve their distress, the petty-minded Constans decided to make the Africans pay him the same as they had paid the Muslims, i.e. 300 *qantara* of gold.

The man chosen by Constantinople to re-establish Roman rule in Africa was a general named William.[1] He sailed with a fleet of vessels carrying 30,000 troops. In due course the Romans landed at Carthage where they disembarked their army and de-

1. In Arabic: Auleema.

manded from the Africans, in the name of the Emperor, 300 *qantara* of gold, the same as had been paid to the Arabs. The Africans refused to pay. They said that they had spent all that they had to save themselves from the Arabs and now just did not have any more. They left no doubt in the mind of the general about what they thought of the Emperor. "In view of what has happened to us," they said, "it would be more appropriate if he would do something to help us."[1]

The general insisted on payment. The Carthaginians persisted in their refusal to pay. If the general wanted that gold he would have to fight for it. And fight he did. A sort of battle took place between his forces and the army of King Hubahiba in which the more sophisticated army of Rome scored a victory, after which William occupied the area of Carthage and brought the province of Africa once again into the Eastern Roman Empire. The date of this event is not known but judging by what followed, it probably took place in 43 Hijri (663 AD).

Hubahiba thought of the former independent life led by his subjects as being much better than what they now suffered under Roman generals and administrative officers. They had been much happier even under the Muslims when the latter ruled over their territory for a short period. Unable to bear the change and unwilling to accept the change as permanent, Hubahiba left Carthage and travelled to Damascus to see Caliph Muawia. There he pleaded for help and asked that an army be sent to drive the Romans out of Africa. The Caliph decided to do just that.

In 45 Hijri (665 AD) an army was despatched from Damascus for the purpose of fighting and defeating William in Africa and destroying or driving his Roman soldiers out of the territory. This army was placed under the command of a general named Muawia bin Hudeij, who was known as a staunch supporter of the Umayyad cause. After Amr bin Al Aas had defeated Muhammad bin Abi Bakr, Caliph Ali's governor of Egypt, prior to resuming the governorship of the province, according to some accounts it was this Muawia bin Hudeij and not Amr bin Al Aas who had had

1. Ibn Khaldun: vol 2; p 1005.

Muhammad's body sown into the skin of a donkey and burned to ashes.[1] Many years later, when the army of Abdullah bin Sad had returned from Subetula and he led an expedition into Nubia to subdue the Nubians, Muawia took part in that expedition and lost an eye to the superb marksmanship of the Nubian horse-archers.

Now Muawia bin Hudeij moved from Damascus to try conclusions with the Roman William. There is mention in history of his having led two expeditions before this into Africa: in 34 and 40 or 41 Hijri, but nothing is known about them except that they took place.[2]

The army marched to Alexandria and then to Barqa, where it was joined by a contingent under Uqba bin Nafe. At Barqa the ill-fated King Hubahiba died and the march went on without him. Some weeks later Muawia entered Africa with an army of 10,000 men, which included a sizable body of noble Qureish and Ansars--Companions of Prophet Muhammad. Among the younger officers serving in his army were Abdullah bin Umar, Abdullah bin Zubeir and Abdul Malik bin Marwan, the last named being the son of the scoundrel Marwan who had embezzled funds after the Battle of Subetula.

Going through the province of Tripolitania some opposition was met from Roman detachments and small forts but it was overcome without much trouble and the army arrived at Qunia, which was the name of the area where the city of Qeirowan was later built.[3] Here they stopped, because they discovered the presence in the vicinity of a large Roman army.

* * *

The Governor of Africa prepared for battle. Scouts brought word of the approach of the Muslims, their entry into African

1. Balazuri: p 229; Tabari: vol 4, p 79.
2. There is some dispute about the year in which the Caliph, in response to the request of the African king, sent the army from Damascus. Tabari and Ibn Khaldun have placed the event in 43 Hijri, but I prefer Marrakushi's 45. Amr bin Al Aas was alive for most of 43, and if this expedition had been launched in that year, he would undoubtedly have played an important part in it. As it happened, he played no part in this expedition and therefore it is more likely to have taken place in 45 Hijri.
3. Recent research at Tunis has established that this region was called Qamunia and not Qunia. Arab historians may have got the name wrong, or used a local variation.

territory, their quick disposal of Roman outposts on the way. Before the Muslims arrived at Qunia, William had set his army in motion. Part of it moved by land and part of it by sea on the same ships which had brought the troops from Constantinople. As the Muslims arrived in Qunia the Roman army of 30,000 men was camped at Sousa. (See Map 9). It was not apparently a brave army, for the ships were kept ready for embarkation in case of a reverse in battle. Its commanding general at Sousa was a Greek named Nicephorus, Najfur to the Arabs.

After a few days, when it became obvious that the Romans were not going to make any move to contact the Muslims, Muawia bin Hudeij organised all the cavalry of his army into one mounted corps and appointed as its commaander Abdullah bin Zubeir, our dashing hero of Subetula. Abdullah was instructed to go and fight the Romans. The actual strength of his cavalry corps is not known.

Abdullah bin Zubeir moved towards Sousa. He got on to some high ground by the coast 12 miles from the city and camped for the night. This high ground (near the present village of Aquda) gave excellent observation of the coast line to north and to south, and Abdullah could see the Roman fleet at anchor and the Roman camp just north of Sousa, not far from the beach. The arrival of the Muslims near Sousa did nothing to restore the confidence of Nicephorus and he got part of his army embarked on the ships for a quick getaway.

The following day Abdullah bin Zubeir moved forward and, bypassing the Roman camp from the right, got to the south-west edge of Sousa. Here he went into camp, at a place which was under observation by the Romans. The space between the two camps was roughly where the modern part of Sousa, full of tourist hotels, stands today. It was flat, open country.

Soon after their arrival it was time for the late afternoon prayer and the entire Muslim force fell into neat lines for the congregational prayer, led by their commander, in full view of the Romans. The Christians watched in awe as the Muslims prayed and rose and prostrated themselves as one man behind the man who was military commander as well as prayer leader.

The next day the Romans lined up for battle. We do not know if this was the full strength of the Roman army or part of it, and we have no details of the battle that followed. All we know is that Abdullah bin Zubeir attacked the Roman army and before long the Romans were in full retreat, some escaping by land routes towards Carthage and others sailing away in their ships. Hardly had the Roman army fled the battlefield when Sousa opened its gates to the Muslims and was occupied without bloodshed. A little later Abdullah moved back to the main Muslim camp and reported to his Commander-in-Chief.

Some units of the Roman army, while retreating from Sousa, stopped at the city of Jalaula, 24 miles from Qunia, and fortified the city.[1] As soon as Muawia heard of this development he sent Abdul Malik bin Marwan with a cavalry detachment of 1,000 horse to take the city.

Abdul Malik moved up and laid siege to the city. Over the next few days the Muslims made several attempts to get into the fort while the Romans made several attempts to sally out and break the siege. Casualties were taken by both sides but there was no decision either way. When Abdul Malik saw that he was getting nowhere he decided to return to the main body of the army and pass the problem back to his army commander. He lifted the siege and began to move back to Qunia.

Hardly had his cavalry moved a couple of miles when the Muslims noticed a large cloud of dust rising behind them. Thinking that the Romans had come out in pursuit of them, Abdul Malik turned and formed up to receive the Roman assault. He also sent a few scouts on to contact the Romans.

The scouts found no Romans on the way. They went on until they had got to Jalaula, and here they found that a large part of the wall of the fort had collapsed. This was the cause of the cloud of dust seen by the Muslims. Abdul Malik was immediately informed and came galloping back to the now vulnerable city.

1. Jalaula (also called Jalula) has for centuries been a dead city, its ruins standing in the foothills about 20 miles west of Qeirowan.

Taking full advantage of the situation, the Muslims attacked the fort through the breach and got in. In no time Roman resistance collapsed and the Muslims took Jalaula as a prize of war, collecting an enormous amount of booty.

History tells us very little about what happened after this. We know from Gibbon that 80,000 captives were taken by the Muslims in this campaign, including those acquired from captured towns and cities. This figure may be somewhat exaggerated. But as for the casualties suffered by both sides and what happened to General Najfur and Governor William – about these matters history is silent.

* * *

The Muslims took all of the province of Carthage, going as far as Bizerta, and during the process overrunning a number of smaller forts in order to eliminate the last remnants of Roman resistance. A large part of the Roman army got away by sea, some sailing to Sicily and others to Constantinople, but those who could not get away became part of the 80,000 captives.

Nothing more happened till the following year: 46 Hijri (666 AD) when Muawia bin Hudeij mounted a naval expedition to Sicily. The naval force, which was really a land army transported in 20 sea-going vessels and commanded by Abdullah bin Qeis, landed at Sicily, raided and pillaged and overcame all opposition. Abdullah stayed in Sicily for a month, gathering spoils, and then returned to Africa. How much of Sicily was really affected by the raid is not known.

The greatest prize taken by the Muslims in Sicily was an idol made of gold and silver and studded with precious stones. Muawia sent this idol as a special gift to Caliph Muawia at Damascus. The Caliph gave it as a present to his mother Hind, the redoubtable woman who had eaten the liver of the noble Hamza at the Battle of Uhud. Hind promptly sold the idol and kept the money. This made the Muslims very angry, but there was nothing they could do about it.[1]

1. Balazuri: p 237; Marrakushi: p 18

Some time after this raid on Sicily, Muawia bin Hudeij packed his bags and returned with his army to Egypt. The war was over. As had happened in the campaign of Abdullah bin Sad nearly 20 years before this, the Muslims came and conquered and went back again. They had won a great victory and the Romans had been trounced and once again driven from Africa, but no durable system was established to incorporate Africa into the permanent structure of the Muslim empire.

In the year following his return from Africa, in other words early in 47 Hijri (667 AD), Muawia bin Hudeij replaced Abdullah bin Amr bin Al Aas as Governor of Egypt. He was to keep this post for nearly four years.

There were some who thought that he had got the job as a reward from Caliph Muawia for the part played by him in restoring Egypt to the Umayyad domain, especially the killing of Muhammad, son of Abu Bakr, and having his corpse sewn into the skin of a donkey and burned to ashes. Muhammad's brother, Abdur Rehman bin Abi Bakr, was very forthright in his accusation. "O Muawia", he said, "you have received your reward from Muawia bin Abi Sufyan. When you killed Muhammad bin Abi Bakr he would appoint you Governor of Egypt, and he has so appointed you".

The one-eyed Governor denied the allegation hotly. "I did not kill Muhammad bin Abi Bakr for a governorship. I only killed him for what he did to Usman."[1]

Not everyone believed him.

1. Marrakushi: p 18.

19

Uqba bin Nafe

The Muslims had twice gone into Africa and conquered the eastern half of it, first under Abdullah bin Sad and the second time under Muawia bin Hudeij. Both expeditions had been a complete success. Yet, after resounding victories the Muslims had abandoned their conquests and returned to their base in Egypt. They came back covered with glory and laden with spoils, but nevertheless one could ask whether it was worth taking all that trouble and risk for the sake of booty and the thrill of thrashing an old enemy again.

There were reasons for this. In Umar's time there was a sound strategical logic to the conquests of Islam but he did not wish to extend the conquest too far or stretch his armies to the point of weakening them. The caliphates of Usman and Ali were troubled times and neither was sufficiently free from internal problems to seek distant horizons. During Muawia's rule conditions remained unsettled for many years and it took him time to consolidate his position. Africa was just too far away from Madina, and the conquest of far-flung regions did not seem important enough. But since there was an element of the raider in the Arab makeup and booty was always welcome, the expeditions were launched and their success was regarded as sufficient justification for the risk and trouble.

Now Muawia was more firmly established as the ruler of the Muslim world. All opposition to his rule had been silenced and he felt free to take measures to expand the territories of Islam and widen its boundaries. The rise of the Muslim naval power added a further dimension to the potentiality of Muslim conquest. Now they could conquer and keep and plant the standard of Islam in the conquered territories. In 50 Hijri (670 AD) Muawia made up his mind to take Africa and incorporate it into the Muslim empire. There would be a third expedition to Africa, and this time it would be a lasting conquest.

The Romans did not come back to Africa. It would be many years before their strength was sufficiently restored for them to challenge again the Muslim occupation of their former territories. But within Africa there were plenty of Romans, those living in the western part of Africa – Numidia and Mauretania – and even in the Carthage area not every garrison or fortress had been eliminated by the Muslims. So the Romans were still there and re-established their posts and their administration. With them were the Berbers, many of whom were Christianised. The local Romans and Berbers had no love for Constantinople and no desire for reunification with the empire, but existed as a seperate group of peoples, distinct from Rome and Spain. Their existence posed no threat to the Muslims in Egypt, but their presence did mean that the return of the Muslims to Africa would not be a walkover. Another invasion would mean extensive campaigning and hard fighting, and the man chosen for this task was the noble Uqba.

He was Uqba bin Nafe bin Abd Qeis bin Laqeet bin Amir bin Umayya bin Tarf bin Al Haris bin Fihr. He was from the Bani Fihr, and was born a few years before the death of the Holy Prophet.[1] Since any Muslim living in Madina in the time of the Prophet was regarded as a Companion, Uqba was a Companion – a little one.[2]

1. Marrakushi (p 19) and Balazuri (p 228) place his birth one year and two years respectively before the death of the Prophet. This could not be correct because the Prophet died in 11 Hijri while Uqba took part in the Nubian Campaign which fought in 22 Hijri. He must therefore have been born at least a few years prior to the Prophet's death.
2. This is disputed by some sources which maintain that he was not a Companion.

He was a seasoned and battle-hardened veteran of the Egyptian Campaign and the expeditions into Africa. He had commanded the Nubian expedition sent by Amr bin Al Aas but in this operation he and his men had a difficult time and many had lost their eyes because of Nubian archers. He had fought in Africa several times and was now positioned at Barqa with a frontier garrison.

Uqba was cast in a heroic mould. He was a born soldier. He sought battle and victory with the eagerness of a passionate lover, not for personal glorification but to spread the word of God and establish the true faith. The hardship of battle was a joy to him; the din of battle was music to his ears. In many ways he resembled Khalid bin Al Waleed: bold, fearless, dashing, thinking of a life spent in the holy war as the perfect life for the Muslim. In the 13 years of life left to him, he was to be the perfect example of the romantic knight of Islam, ending a glorious military career in a great, bloody act of martyrdom.

The Holy Prophet had said: "From Africa will rise (on the Day of Judgement) 70,000 martyrs, their faces bright as the full moon."[1]

Uqba would be the most illustrious of these martyrs.

* * *

Uqba marched from Barqa with intent to conquer Africa and all beyond. In fact, so far as he was concerned, it was his intention to conquer the whole world, and if he failed to do so it was not for lack of will on his part but because the land finished and he could not go any farther. But more of that later.

He marched with an army of 10,000 men. There were some contingents from Syria and Egypt sent by order of the Caliph to give him the required strength, but many regiments had been his for a long time, had campaigned with him in Africa and were stationed as part of his garrison at Barqa. These contingents included quite a few Berbers who had been converted by him to Islam.

1. Marrakushi: p 7.

The march from Barqa took place some time in 50 Hijri (670 AD).[1]

After a two week's march the army arrived at Surt (Sirte) and went into camp. Here Uqba decided to delay the advance into the heart of Africa until the Libyans had been properly brought into line; and this was necessary because many of the Berber tribes in the region which had pledged loyalty and tribute to the Muslims in the first conquest of Libya by Amr bin Al Aas in 23 Hijri, had broken their pledge and refused to honour their agreement. So Uqba left the bulk of his army in camp at Surt and rode off with 800 mounted men – 400 horse and 400 camel – all equipped and prepared for long, waterless journeys. As his first objective he chose Waddan. (For this and subsequent places see map at endpaper).

Upon arrival at Waddan he attacked the place and soon after the resistance of the inhabitants collapsed and the place was won. The king of Waddan (probably more of a big chief than king) renewed the pact made by Amr bin Al Aas and agreed to abide by its terms. When this had been done Uqba cut off the lobe of his ear. The king protested vehemently, "Why did you do this to me? You just made a pact with me."

Uqba looked at him intently for a while. "I did that to teach you a lesson," he replied calmly. "Whenever you touch your ear it will remind you not to fight the Arabs."[2]

Uqba collected 360 slaves, which was the number due from the people of Waddan under the old pact, and prepared to march on. He asked the people what lay beyond them. They spoke of Jarma, a city of Fezzan at a distance of 8 days' march.

Uqba marched for Jarma. Upon completion of the journey, when he was six miles from the town, he stopped and went into

1. There are other versions regarding the date of this campaign. Some place it in 46, some even in 42 Hijri, but those dates are unlikely. Since Muawia bin Hudeij became governor of Egypt in 47 Hijri and it was after his appointment that Uqba was launched, the year 50 is more likely to be the correct one, as given by Yaqut (vol 1, p 326).
2. Ibn Abdul Hakam: p 194; Bakri: p 13.

camp. From here he sent messengers to the town demanding its surrender, and his demand was accepted by the people. No blood was shed.

Jarma too had a king, according to historians, but he too was probably nothing more than a big chief. However, he came out of the city with the intention of visiting the Muslim general and paying his respects. Once outside he waited for his entourage, which was slow to get ready. Before it could join him a Muslim cavalry squadron arrived on the spot and took up positions between the big chief and his city and refused to let the others out. Even the big chief's horse was not allowed outside the town.

They forced him to walk on his flat feet all the way to Uqba's headquarters. Six miles is nothing as a walking distance, but this chief was a soft chief, a corpulent fellow apparently unused to exercise of any kind. When he arrived outside Uqba's tent he was in an exhausted state. He even started to spit blood. It was certainly a very unimposing chief who stood panting and puffing before Uqba bin Nafe.

"Why did you do this to me," he asked pitiously, "when I was coming to you willingly?"

Uqba looked intently at the miserable fellow for a while, wondering what part of this king to remove. He decided that perhaps enough had been done to him for memory not to fail. He said, "As a lesson to you. Whenever you remember this you will not fight the Arabs."[1]

At Jarma a new pact was prepared because there was none from before this time, and its terms included a contribution of 360 slaves. The king was left alone and intact, compared with his predecessor and his successor.

For some weeks Uqba moved around in the region of Fezzan, discovering and subduing new forts, preaching Islam to their inhabitants, many of whom accepted the new faith. Then he

1. Ibn Abdul Hakam: p 195.

turned his steps towards a place called Khawar (also called Jawan) which was big enough to be well known in the province. It took him 15 days to get there and he arrived to find that it was a large fortified town.[1]

The Muslims laid siege and settled down to force the inhabitants into submission. But when a whole month had passed and the defenders showed no sign of submitting, nor even apparently of suffering any hardship, Uqba decided that siege warfare was not really the right kind of fighting for the chivalrous Arab. He lifted the siege and went away from Khawar, this time going towards the border with the Sudan, to some place not known or even mentioned in the early histories.

Here he found a town and captured it. Here also there was a chief, who submitted and accepted the terms laid down by the victor. Uqba cut off his little finger.

"Why did you do this to me"? the chief protested.

"As a lesson to you," replied Uqba. "Whenever you look at your little finger you will refrain from fighting the Arabs."[2]

The reader might imagine that Uqba had a rather impish sense of humour. But this is unlikely. His entire makeup was so serious, he was so obsessed with the ambition of fighting battles in the holy war and spreading the word of God, that it would be unthinkable for him to do these things as a mischievous prank. He really meant to make sure that these tribes would remain faithful to Islam and not revolt against the Muslim power. And in this he was entirely successful because the Berber tribes of Libya, with minor exceptions, never turned against Islam, and thus Uqba's unusual way of driving his point home was to their advantage. By discouraging revolt it saved them from suffering the horrors of war, which included more painful losses than earlobes and little fingers.

1. The present location or condition of this place, or whether its correct name was Khawar or Jawan, is not known.
2. Ibn Abdul Hakam: p 195; Bakri: p 13.

This last-mentioned chief was the last man to lose a part of himself to Uqba's unusual methods. Uqba collected 360 slaves and returned to Khawar which he had tried unsuccessfully to conquer in a recent siege. This time he passed by Khawar, making sure that he was seen by the inhabitants of the city and making no attempt to fight them. He travelled a distance of three days's march from it, then doubled back on his tracks and got to Khawar to find the inhabitants utterly unprepared for battle. Having taken them by surprise, he stormed the city and captured it at once. Many of the warriors defending the town were killed and the town itself was taken by the Muslims as a prize of war.

After this he began his journey back to Surt. He went by Zaweela, the capital of Fezzan, but there was no battle here because the people of Zaweela had remained loyal to their pledge and Uqba had been visiting the place in past years. On his way he found a few other places which resisted and were taken by force of arms, and after an absence of five months he rejoined the main body of his army at Surt.

A few days later Uqba set the army in motion towards the west. He occupied Tripoli and from here sent a column to Ghudamis, a large city on the main route to the Sudan. (The Sudan meant and was the region of the blacks.) This column captured Ghudamis without difficulty and returned to join the army on the route of march. All the important places in the eastern part of Africa, including the province of Tripolitania, were now in Muslim hands.

The Muslims went on to take Qafsa (Gafsa) and the nearby district of Qasteelia which included the towns of Tauzar and Nafta.[1] The remarkable thing about Qasteelia was that its people were dog-eaters. They bred and fattened dogs for eating, and it is believed that they fed their dogs on dates.[2]

From Qafsa, Uqba sent a mounted column northwards as advance guard on the road to Sousa under one of his lieutenants who captured a fort near the city of Majjana, 15 miles from Qafsa.

1. According to some, Qafsa itself was part of the district of Qasteelia.
2. Yaqut: vol 4, p 97.

The main body of the army moved up to join the advance guard, and here Uqba decided to stop for a while. Another year had begun – 51 Hijri. It began on 18 January 671.

* * *

Uqba had taken about as much of Africa as had been taken before by Abdullah bin Sad and Muawia bin Hudeij, but he had come to stay. He understood very well that his army was like an island of Islam in a sea of Berbers and Romans. He had already converted a large number of Berbers, but if the Muslims went back again his efforts would be wasted and there would be little encouragement for future conversion. Moreover, ahead of him lay the rest of the continent: the Maghreb, for which a major expedition would have to be mounted some day. All this needed a base, something permanent which would act as a centre of Islam in Africa.

A cantonment of sorts already existed in the region west of Sousa, built by Muawia bin Hudeij, and the Muslims had already moved from Qafsa to this area. But this was not quite what they wanted. There would have to be a better place. Uqba wanted a city but not this one. He assembled his troops.

"Lo," he addressed them, "the people of this land have no character. When the sword is laid upon them they submit; when the Muslims go away they return to their own ways and their own religion. When a Muslim leader enters Africa they accept his call to Islam; but when he returns, those who had accepted the religion of Allah revert to disbelief. I see it as your task, O Muslims, to build a city in Africa which will give power to Islam till the end of time".

All agreed to the proposal. They were all keen that a city should be built and that they should garrison it as defenders of the frontier. "Let us go near the sea," said the men to Uqba in their enthusiasm. "Thus we can guard the frontier as well as fight the holy war".

This was not quite what Uqba had in mind. He saw the dangers inherent in building a city at the edge of the sea, its vulnerability to the Roman fleet which was still a powerful force in the Mediterranean. He explained this to his men.

"I fear that the Lord of Constantinople might attack it by surprise and capture it. Let us leave between the city and the sea more space than a naval commander can cover without his movement being known. And if there is so much space between it and the sea that prayers do not have to be shortened, then we remain defenders of the frontier."[1]

Again the men agreed. Since no one liked the place which Muawia had chosen as a settlement, Uqba led his men out and brought them to a place full of vegetation and trees and undergrowth. The area was apparently covered with jungle or marsh.[2] It promised to be full of unpleasant creatures that run and crawl, and the Muslims had been long enough in this area to know of the presence in the jungle of lions also.

The men were less than thrilled with the idea of going into the forbidding jungle. "Lo," they said to their commander, "You have ordered us to build in an area of swamp and dense vegetation which will not get any better. We fear the wild beasts and the snakes and other denizens."

Then we have the charming story of how Uqba cleared the jungle of its unwanted occupants. In his army he had 18 Companions of the Holy Prophet and many sons of Companions. He led them to the edge of the swamp and called in a loud voice: "O serpents and wild beasts! O inhabitants of the valley! We are Companions of the Apostle of Allah. Go away from us, may Allah have mercy upon you, for we are coming in. Anyone we find after this we will kill."

1. The word used here by Uqba and his men is *Murabitun*, plural of *Murabit*, which means a frontier guards, manning a frontier post which was called Ribat. The word became famous in later times, especially in the 11th Century when the Moroccan king, Yusuf bin Tashfeen, led his Berbers into Spain to save the Muslims from defeat at the hands of the Christians. His followers were known as Murabiteen, in the sense of holy warriors or warrior monks, from which the West later derived the word: Marabout.
2. The area around Qeirowan today is pleasant, smiling country but not jungle. Perhaps the High Priestess saw to the jungle, as narrated in Chapter 24.

He made the call three times.Then for three days, from sunrise till noon, Uqba and his soldiers would stand and watch in amazement the sight of the denizens of the jungle evacuating their jungle; lions and wolves carrying their young, snakes and scorpions carrying their young. They were allowed to go unmolested, by order of Uqba. Just the sight of this exodus as a result of Uqba's call had a tremendous impact on the local population and large numbers of Berbers embraced Islam.

As soon as the movement of the animals was over, and it took three days to complete, the Muslims moved in. Uqba planted his lance in the ground and said, "This is your Qeirowan."[1]

The trees were cut, the land was cleared of unwanted growth and the city of Qeirowan was built. Its construction began in 51 Hijri and went on for four years before the city was complete. It was 36 miles from Sousa. And for 40 years after the Muslims moved in to clear the jungle, no one ever saw a snake or a scorpion or a wild beast in Qeirowan. It was even said that you could not get one for 1000 dinars. The city was to rise in glory as the Muslim capital of Africa and a centre of learning, and would remain the foremost city of Islam in North Africa for 400 years.

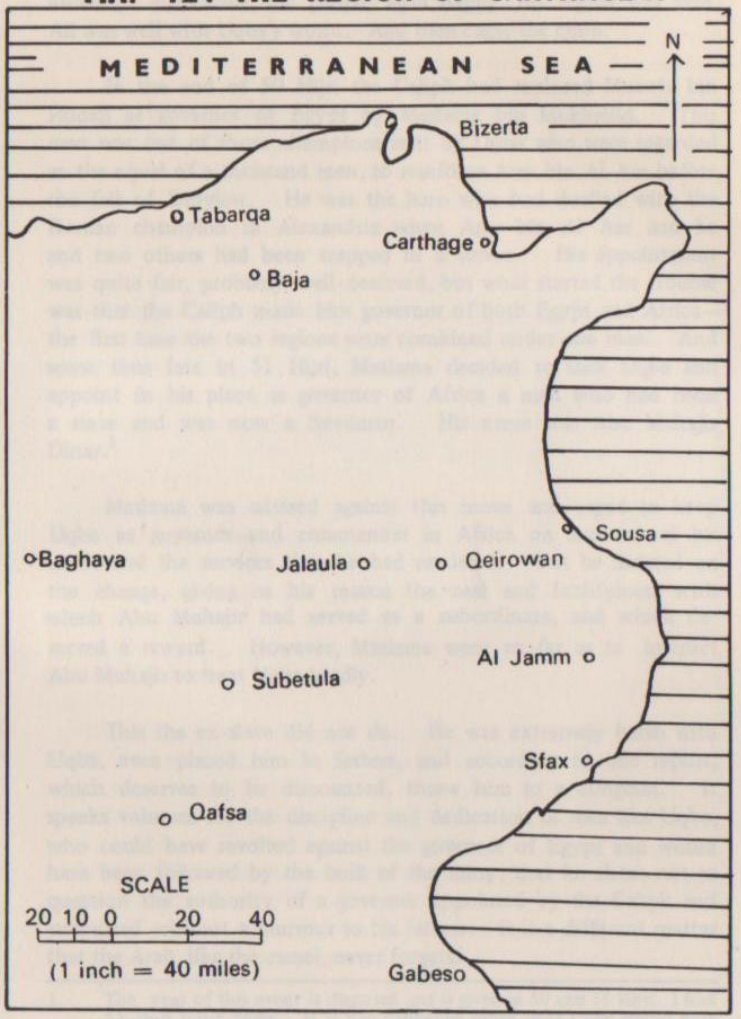
* * *

Uqba ruled Africa as governor with his headquarters at Qeirowan. This was not only the political capital of the Muslim state but also, strangely enough, a frontier post, for the Muslims did not really advance much farther than this. They did not take Carthage and Tunis, not this time, but they felt safe without extending their borders beyond Qeirowan because there was no organised opposition in Africa or the Maghreb. As stated earlier, Uqba and his army were like an island of Islam in a sea of non-Muslims: Berbers, Romans, Vandals, but the non-Muslims were without any cohesive central authority or even a common objective or theme. That is why the Muslims did not have to clear and subdue the entire region which they now regarded as theirs.

Uqba ruled wisely and well, proving himself as good a governor as he was a general. He had plans for leading a powerful ex-

1. Ibn Abdul Hakam: p 196; Marrakushi: pp 19-20; Yaqut: vol 4, pp 212-3. The name is derived from "qeirawan:" – Arabic for *caravan*.

MAP 12: THE REGION OF CARTHAGE II



pedition to the west, but that would have to wait for a little while. The city of Qeirowan had to be built and proper garrisons established. Meanwhile, his people were happy, his region was safe. All was well with Uqba's world. And then came the crash.

In the end of 50 Hijri the Caliph had replaced Muawia bin Hudeij as governor of Egypt by Maslama bin Mukhallid. This man was one of those champions sent by Umar who were regarded as the equal of a thousand men, to reinforce Amr bin Al Aas before the fall of Babylon. He was the hero who had duelled with the Roman champion in Alexandria when Amr bin Al Aas and he and two others had been trapped in a tower. His appointment was quite fair, probably well-deserved, but what started the trouble was that the Caliph made him governor of both Egypt and Africa—the first time the two regions were combined under one man. And some time late in 51 Hijri, Maslama decided to sack Uqba and appoint in his place as governor of Africa a man who had been a slave and was now a freedman. His name was Abu Muhajir Dinar.[1]

Maslama was advised against this move and urged to keep Uqba as governor and commander in Africa on account of his merit and the services that he had rendered. But he insisted on the change, giving as his reason the zeal and faithfulness with which Abu Muhajir had served as a subordinate, and which deserved a reward. However, Maslama went so far as to instruct Abu Muhajir to treat Uqba kindly.

This the ex-slave did not do. He was extremely harsh with Uqba, even placed him in fetters, and according to one report, which deserves to be discounted, threw him in a dungeon. It speaks volumes for the discipline and dedication of men like Uqba, who could have revolted against the governor of Egypt and would have been followed by the bulk of the army, that he chose not to question the authority of a governor appointed by the Caliph and submitted without a murmur to his fetters. It is a different matter that the Arab, like the camel, never forgets!

1. The year of this event is disputed and is given as 50 and 55 Hijri. I find 51 Hijri more likely. If it had happened much later Uqba would have invaded the Maghreb before his dismissal, and we know that he did not.

How long Uqba remained a prisoner of Dinar we do not know. According to one report it was not until the Caliph heard about his ill-treatment and ordered his release that the fetters were removed and he was freed of all restrictions. He left town with the intention of proceeding to Damascus.

Meanwhile, out of petty jealousy, Dinar took it into his head not to live in a city built by Uqba. He would build one of his own, one by which he would be remembered. So he chose a site 2 miles north of Qeirowan and there he ordered the building of a new town. When built, everybody in Qeirowan would move to the town of Abu Muhajir Dinar.

It was shortly after he left Qeirowan that Uqba was informed of the order of Dinar to move from Qeirowan to the new town. This was the limit, thought Uqba; this was adding insult to injury. Uqba prayed against Dinar. "O Lord," he said, raising his hands in supplication, "do not let me die until you have given me power over Dinar, son of the mother of Dinar."[1]

This was a polite Arabic way of expressing doubt about the identity of the fellow's father, i.e. that one was sure about his mother and that was all. Dinar heard about this prayer, but what worried him was not the insult but the fact that Uqba was known as a man whose prayers were always answered by God. Thereafter the wretched man went in fear of what Uqba would do to him when he did get power over him.

Uqba travelled all the way to Damascus, a sad general very unjustly treated. A man so noble and so dedicated to the cause of Islam, a man so brave and loyal who had rendered services as he had done, deserved the greatest reward that a government could offer, in the form of honour and recognition. But here was Uqba bin Nafe, dismissed without reason by an ungrateful government and placed in fetters by an ex-slave. This was often the fate of Muslim generals in the time of the Umayyads, and later also in the Abbasid period. One day you were a great military commander, the next day a humble or disgraced nobody.

1. Ibn Abdul Hakam: p 197.

Uqba had an interview with Muawia and was bitter in his complaint. "I have conquered lands, which submitted to me. I built edifices and established a mosque for the congregation and settled people. Then you sent a slave of the Ansars who treated me very badly in my dismissal."[1]

Muawia, a wily politician, made many excuses and promised to restore him to office, but actually did nothing. He had used Uqba and did not need him any more. For many years our noble hero had to cool his heels and await justice.

* * *

Strangely enough, justice was done to Uqba by the man least qualified to do so, a man cursed by much of the Muslim world as the embodiment of evil. This was Yazeed, son of Muawia, known as the villain of Karbala.

In 60 Hijri (680 AD) Muawia died, full of years if not of honour, having forced everyone, before his death, to swear allegiance to his son Yazeed, who was known as a drunk and a pervert and a thoroughly evil man. In 61 Hijri took place the tragedy of Karbala where the Prophet's noble grandson Hussain and his companions were martyred. In the same year Yazeed reappointed Uqba as governor of Africa and separated this province from Egypt.

During the years that Uqba spent patiently at Damascus, Abu Muhajir Dinar did not sit idly in his new town. He led an expedition to the Maghreb and at Tilimsan, a little south of Oran, fought and defeated a Berber force under a famous chieftain named Kuseila. Dinar offered Kuseila Islam and the Berber accepted the new faith along with many of his followers. Kuseila was not, however, serious about Islam and was to have an interesting career in relation to Islam, as future chapters will unfold. Dinar returned to his new town and ruled Africa in peace until his turn came to taste the same medicine which he had given to Uqba. He heard of Uqba's reappointment in 61 Hijri.[2]

1. *Ibid:* Marrakushi: p 22.
2. Some historians have placed Uqba's reappointment in 62 Hijri. The point is discussed in a footnote in the next chapter.

Uqba set off from Damascus. With him travelled 25 Companions of the Prophet. On his way to Africa he passed Fustat and met Maslama bin Mukhallid, who had been responsible for his dismissal and who would now be his fellow governor in the continent. Maslama tried his best to make amends, assured Uqba that he never agreed with the behaviour of Dinar *vis-a-vis-* Uqba and had in fact directed Dinar to be kind to Uqba. Uqba accepted Maslama's regrets. He also met Abdullah bin Amr bin Al Aas, who had settled down in Fustat. Abdullah made a prediction which gladdened the heart of Uqba. "O Uqba," he said, "perhaps you belong to the army of soldiers who will enter paradise in their riding clothes."[1] This had reference to a prophecy made by Prophet Muhammad regarding some of his followers who would die in battle and go to paradise in the clothes in which they travelled, fought and died.

The vengeance of the Arab is terrible. Uqba got to Qeirowan. The first thing he did was to put fetters on Abu Muhajir Dinar, the second was to order the destruction of the town built by Dinar, the third was to get the people back into Qeirowan and get the city going again.

Then he went round the city, along with the Companions and sons of Companions, and prayed for his city: "O Lord, fill it with knowledge. Fill it with those who obey you. Make it a source of strength to your religion and a source of disgrace to those who deny you."[2]

Uqba bin Nafe was a man whose prayer was always accepted by God.

* * *

Uqba was about to lead a great expedition to the west, about to plunge into the heart of the Maghreb. He was about to advance like an irresistible force from city to city, from fortress to fortress, from hill to valley, flattening all opposition in his path and sounding the call to prayer in every conquered town and district. He would fight Romans and Berbers but mainly Berbers, whose heartland

1. Ibn Abdul Hakam: p 199.
2. Marrakushi: p 24.

was the Maghreb and whose greatest strength lay in the Maghreb. Since the Berbers now enter our history in force, it is just as well for the reader to know something about them.

A good deal of research has been carried out on the Berbers by historians and scholars. Ibn Khaldun wrote many chapters on their origin, their tribal structure, their political and social organisation, religion, history, etc. Later scholars of the West have carried out deep and systematic research on the subject of these people. The picture of their background, however, is still not very clear and there is still a good deal that is vague in our knowledge of the Berbers. Moreover, there is no need for the reader to have more than a casual acquaintance with these people, enough to understand their organisation and character.

The Berbers are not one race or one group of people but several groups who entered the mainstream of North African life, coming from many directions and interacting upon one another. They eventually evolved into a group with similar racial and cultural characteristics. The group in time became the largest one inhabiting the northern zone of Africa from Western Egypt to the Atlantic, populating the modern countries of Libya, Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco and present-day Mauretania (the ancient Mauretania was roughly what is now North-Western Algeria and North-Eastern Morocco).

Originally, it appears, the Berbers were an oceanic people. They came from Crete, Cyprus or Asia Minor, perhaps even from parts of Greece. They came to Palestine as a maritime nation and invaded Canaan in about the 12th Century BC. They were the Philistines of the Bible.

Eventually the conflict between them and the Semites culminated in a battle between King David and Goliath, the gigantic king of the Philistines. Goliath was slain in single combat by David in this battle, which took place in the early part of the 10th Century BC, and as a result of their defeat the Philistines were forced to move out of the land. They came to Egypt, but their presence was not welcomed by the Copts who drove them out of their country.

They went to Barqa, and here they split into various tribes and clans, some settling in Libya and others moving farther west into the Maghreb until they reached the shores of the Atlantic. These people were the ancestors of the Berbers.

The dating of such events in history is not very accurate. Either the Berbers came in contact with the Greeks and Romans in North Africa or the Greeks and Romans came in contact with the Berbers in North Africa. The Greeks first appeared in Libya in the 6th Century BC, but even before the Berbers got to North Africa there were European peoples living in the region who fused and became one with the newcomers. In later centuries the Berbers fought the Romans, won some battles tactically but lost most wars strategically, and submitted to Roman rule. It came to be understood that the coastal cities and valleys would belong to the Romans, the mountains and the deserts to the Berbers.

The Berbers are of Eurasian stock. They have Caucasoid features with brunet pigmentation. They are often fair and blond, especially in the mountains of the Maghreb. At one time they spoke a Hamitic language, which has come down to the present-day Berber language spoken in its various dialects from the Siwa Oasis in Western Egypt to the Atlantic Ocean and from the River Niger to the Mediterranean Sea. Their cultural and linguistic bonds have held them together, though some Berber tribes are perhaps not Berber at all, e.g. the Kutama, the Sinhaja.[1]

They followed whoever came in strength and conquered the land. They joined the conquerors in plundering others. In time they even plundered their earlier masters by joing a new conqueror when he came in sufficient power to take over the land. Their fortunes shifted with the shift of fortune of the conquerors and the foreign rulers of North Africa.

In religion they varied. Many tribes remained Jewish as a result of influences coming down from the days of Goliath. Many tribes adopted Christianity because of their contact with the Romans who took to the faith of Jesus in the early 4th Century. Many

1. According to Ibn Khaldun (vol 2, 95; vol 6, p 177) these tribes are of ancient Arabian extraction.

were sun-worshippers. Many worshipped idols while some were pagans. They were inconsistent and wore their religion lightly, like clothes to be discarded when no longer needed. With the coming of Islam they would accept the new faith also, then revert to whatever they followed before. They would again become Muslims and again apostatise. They apostatised 12 times in the early Islamic period and it was not till the time of Musa bin Nuseir, who appears a few chapters hence, that Islam gained a permanent hold on the Berber's heart. Then they became great holy warriors.

Their name came from their contact with the Arabs. In Arabic the word *barbar* means to mutter, to make a noise which no one understands. There were many dialects in their language and they kept talking and disputing with each other. The Arab thought that no one did as much *barbar* as these people. The name stuck: *Barbar*, or as now spelt in English: Berber.[1]

They were a brave people, warlike and chivalrous, with intense tribal loyalties. They were a beautiful people; fine handsome men and fine lovely women. Although submitting to foreign invaders whom they did not have the power to resist, they accepted no central authority and more than was necessary. They stuck to their tribal and clan organisation and ethics. They followed blindly their tribal chiefs who were kings and generals, ruling them in peace and leading them in war.

This, then, was the nation of Berbers against whom Uqba bin Nafe made war as he launched his invasion of the Maghreb.[2]

1. *Ibid:* p 175.
2. Some modern scholars in Tunisia reject the historical theory of the descent of the Berbers from the Philistines and maintain, on the strength of recent research, that the Berbers are indigenous to the northern zone of African, that they have always been here, certainly as far back as the Stone Age. However, the fact that many Berber tribes were Jewish supports the contention of the historians regarding the connection of the Berbers with Goliath. Further investigation will no doubt throw more light on the question. Until then, Allah knows best!

20

Uqba's Invasion of the Maghreb

The vindictiveness shown by Uqba towards Abu Muhajir Dinar was part of the Arab character of the time. It was quite simple: he (Uqba) would do to him (Dinar) what he (Dinar) had done to him (Uqba). Perhaps he gloated over the power which he had now gained over the ill-fated and ill-advised ex-slave and ex-governor. But he was just in his treatment. Uqba had been put in fetters by Dinar, so Uqba put Dinar in fetters. And to indulge his Arab pride Uqba kept Dinar with him all the time and wherever he went, his prisoner went with him. Thus Dinar had to accompany the commander on the invasion which was about to begin, with fetters on his feet. The poor fellow would not live to see himself a free man.

Uqba set off from Qeirowan in about the middle of 61 Hijri (spring of 681 AD). He had an army of 10,000 at Qeirowan of which half was left as a garrison, and he picked up more soldiers as he went along, adding contingents from Berber tribes as they were converted, but historians make no mention of the full strength of his army. It may have numbered 20,000 men at its peak. And he set out not with a comprehensive plan of strategical manoeuvre to conquer all of the Maghreb but in the spirit of fighting the infidel, when he found him, where he found him; with the aim of crushing the resistance of every unbeliever who raised his head.

The unbeliever raised his head at Baghaya, a large city at the foot of Jabal Auras. (The city no longer exists but was near the present Khenchela). Romans and Christian Berbers gathered in strength at Baghaya and fortified the city, making it clear that they would resist the Muslim advance. They drew Uqba like a magnet. He arrived at Baghaya and strung a line of posts around the city, keeping the main body of his army in camp some distance away for use in battle should the Christians sally out in strength.

The Christians had no intention of remaining in the fort just because a few posts had been placed around them. They came out of their city with the bulk of their army, which was larger in strength than the Muslim force opposing them. The two armies formed up outside the city and the battle began.

It was a bloody, pitiless struggle with no mercy sought or shown, with every man straining every nerve and both commanders striving manfully for victory. Before the day ended the Christian army had been cut to pieces, with corpses of Romans and Berbers strewn all over the battlefield. In this first, fierce battle of what was to be a long, fierce campaign for the Maghreb, Uqba had won a clear victory and inflicted a crushing defeat upon the enemy. The carnage was frightful . . . . . a bloody omen of what lay ahead for Uqba bin Nafe.

The city of Baghaya was taken without further resistance and the Muslims treated it as a prize of war. What the Muslims valued the most in the booty was the horses captured by them, which were the best they had ever seen and the best they had ever acquired in this campaign. But Uqba kept his men in camp outside Baghaya, feeling more at home in the open than inside a large city.

A few weeks after this battle, when the spoils had been divided and arrangements made for the treatment of the wounded, Uqba marched to Carthage. Here too the Romans and Berbers came out to fight, and here too they suffered a terrible defeat which almost wiped out their army. Those who survived became captives and another fine lot of horses fell into Muslim hands for use in the campaign that was to follow.

Not many days had passed when Uqba received reports of a concentration of Christians at Monasteer. (See Map 13). This

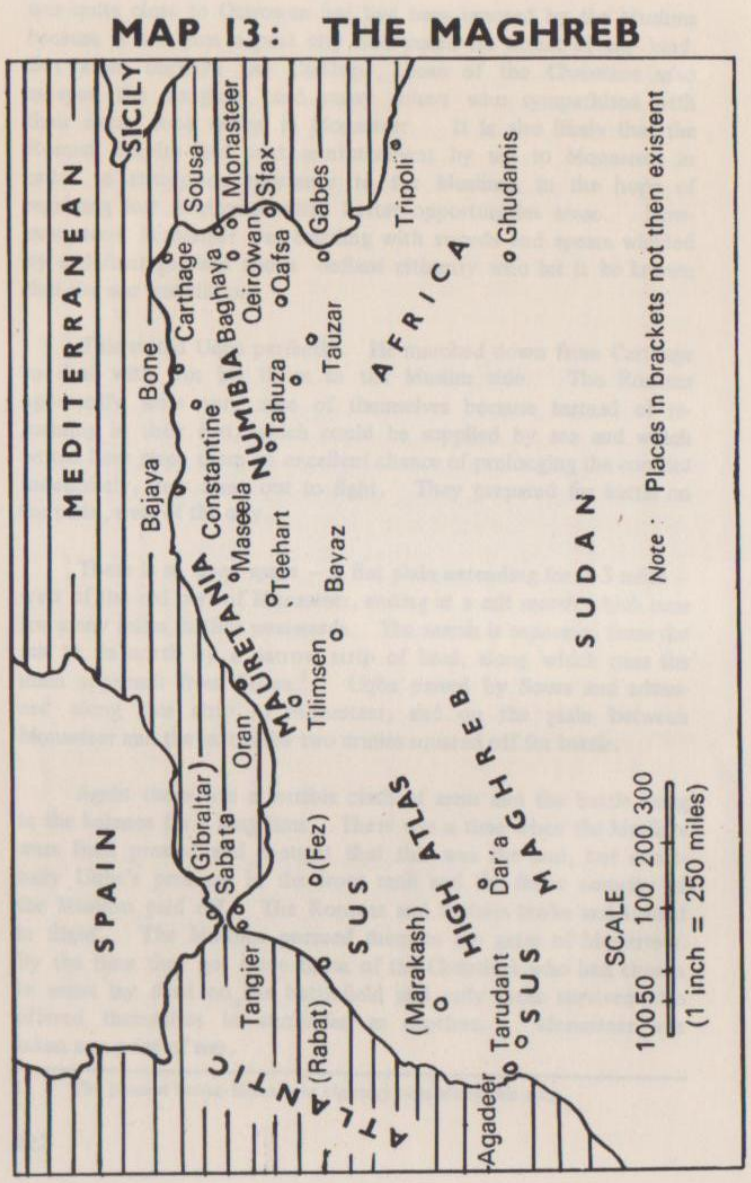
was quite close to Qeirowan but had been ignored by the Muslims because it was just a port city and posed no threat of any kind. But after Baghaya and Carthage, those of the Christians who escaped the slaughter, and many others who sympathised with their cause, took refuge in Monasteer. It is also likely that the Roman Empire had sent reinforcement by sea to Monasteer in order to strengthen resistance to the Muslims, in the hope of regaining lost territories when better opportunities arose. However, soon Monasteer was bristling with swords and spears wielded by a defiant garrison and a defiant citizenry who let it be known that the war was still on.

This suited Uqba perfectly. He marched down from Carthage to deal with this big thorn in the Muslim side. The Romans apparently were very sure of themselves because instead of remaining in their fort, which could be supplied by sea and which would have given them an excellent chance of prolonging the conflict indefinitely, they came out to fight. They prepared for battle on the plain, west of the city.

There is an open space – a flat plain extending for 2-3 miles – west of the old part of Monasteer, ending at a salt marsh which runs for many miles further westwards. The marsh is separated from the sea to its north by a narrow strip of land, along which runs the main approach from Sousa.[1] Uqba passed by Sousa and advanced along this strip to Monasteer, and on the plain between Monasteer and the marsh the two armies squared off for battle.

Again there was a terrible clash of arms and the battle hung in the balance for a long time. There was a time when the Muslims were hard pressed and thought that this was the end, but eventually Uqba's presence in the front rank and the fierce tenacity of the Muslims paid off. The Romans and Berbers broke and turned in flight. The Muslims pursued them to the gates of Monasteer. By the time they got there those of the Christians who had chosen to resist lay dead on the battlefield and only those survived who offered themselves in surrender as captives. Monasteer was taken as a prize of war.

1. The present Sousa-Monasteer highway runs along this strip.



The third and most hard-fought battle in Uqba's campaign was over. He had met three armies in the field, each stronger than his own, and decisively defeated each of them, taking a vast amount of booty as his reward for each victory. But he was back where he had started, i.e. Qeirowan. He had done a full circle, first going west, then north-east, then south, and ending at home. He was still in Africa and the Maghreb was a long way away.

To the military student this campaign might not make sense. Perhaps Uqba himself would make no claim to strategical wisdom. He was not working on a strategical plan – advancing from base to base, clearing and establishing lines of communication, weakening his enemy before fighting him, choosing his own ground for every battle. Luckily for him, the generals opposing him were not displaying much military wisdom either. Instead of remaining within their fortified cities, to be supplied by sea and thus resist indefinitely, they kept coming out to fight in the open in a kind of battle which was just what the Muslims wanted. Tactically Uqba had handled his regiments very well, leading them from victory to victory, but he was not concerned with strategical principles. It is worth understanding that he was out to fight the infidel, and wherever the infidel offered battle Uqba fought him. It was as if any enemy would appear in front of him, waving a red flag as a challenge, and Uqba would go rushing at him like a knight in shining armour.

The province of Carthage was now fully subdued and no threat remained to Qeirowan. Some months had passed in these operations, which brings us to the autumn of 681 (end of 61-beginning of 62 Hijri). The lateness of the season and the cold of the Maghreb winter precluded further operations. The Muslims settled down for the winter at Qeirowan to await the coming of better weather.[1]

* * *

1. The chronology of the Campaign of the Maghreb described in this chapter and the next has not been given by the early historians. Its breakdown by seasons is the result of calculations made by this writer, keeping in mind all the battles fought by Uqba, the vast geographical scale of the campaign and the inhibiting effect on military operations of the severe Moroccan winter. We know that the campaign took three years, starting in 61 and ending in 63 Hijri (Ibn Abdul Hakam: p 199; Marrakushi; p 30). Militarily, such extensive operations would need three campaigning seasons.

The winter ended, and it was again time for Uqba to go. He organised a garrison to look after Qeirowan and placed in command as his deputies two good men: Zuheir bin Qeis al Balawi and Umar bin Ali. He then sent for his children and said: "I have purchased my life from Allah and dedicated it to the holy war against those who disbelieve in Him, until I die in the holy war and rejoin Him. I know not if you will see me again after this day, for I seek death in the way of Allah."[1]

He was right. They would not see him again.

Early in 682 (about mid-62 Hijri) he set off once again to conquer the Maghreb. This time he really would go to the Maghreb, which began where Africa ended.

Beyond the province of Carthage lay the province of Numidia, and marching through Numidia, Uqba faced several armies of Berbers reinforced by Romans. Time after time the princes of the Berbers came up against him, fighting singly and collectively, and horde after horde stood in the path of his progress through their land. Time after time Uqba fought and defeated the Berbers, time after time the horde recoiled and fled. He captured forts as he went along, driving his enemy in front of him. He rode through the valley of Maseela, a region known to the Arabs as the Zab, leaving behind him a trail of broken Berber armies. (It was in the area of this valley that Africa changed into the Maghreb.) He went on until he arrived at Teehart (also called Tahart by early geographers). With every Berber force that he shattered, he converted large numbers of them and added many able-bodied men to his army, making up to strength the ranks depleted in war.

Teehart was known as a very cold place. It was at the foot of the hill of Jazzul by the river Mina. It was cold and wet and afflicted by heavy rainfall and covered by snow in the winter. An Arab who had visited the place and was later travelling in Arabia in the heat of a mid-summer's day, looked up at the sun and said: "You can burn me as much as you like, but by Allah, you are miserable in Teehart" And it is said that a visitor to Teehart once asked a

1. Marrakushi: p 23.

native how long the winter lasted in the place. The native replied: "Thirteen months!"[1]

Teehart was a powerful fort. The Romans and Berbers living in its vicinity, their strength augmented by those who had fled before the oncoming Muslims, had concentrated in the fort to continue resistance. And Uqba came on to do to these opponents what he had done to others before them.

Again the Christians came out to fight in the open. Perhaps as at Baghaya, Carthage and Monasteer, there had not been sufficient supplies to withstand a siege. Perhaps the Berbers, like the Arabs, did not like being cooped up in a fort. Perhaps it was just a matter of poor generalship. Whatever the reason, the defenders of Teehart came out to fight in the open and received a terrible thrashing at the hands of the Muslims. The Christians turned and fled, leaving a battlefield covered with bodies, hoping to find safety within the fort which they should not have left in the first place. The Muslim cavalry galloped after them, caught up with them, went through them, cutting them down left and right, and got to the gates of the fort before the stricken army arrived. Here in a last bloody action the Muslims slaughtered the fugitives and spared only those who readily laid down their arms.

Uqba spent no longer than was necessary at Teehart. Rebuilding his strength, he resumed his relentless westward advance. But now the enemies who remained in his path would no longer fight him. The Christians fled from his route of march, scattering in all directions, abandoning towns and villages. Many contingents locked themselves up within forts and wisely would not come out to fight, preferring the safety of the fortress to the doubtful glory of fighting a great Muslim conqueror.

Uqba had no desire to get involved in siege operations. It was not the way of the Arab, nor did he have any siege equipment. Whenever a defended fort lay in his path he would circumvent it and march on, fighting only those tribes which stood in the open to dispute his passage. All who opposed him bit the dust. When

1. Yaqut: vol 1, p 814; Marrakushi: p 25.

the last of the opposition had been cleared, Uqba passed from the province of Mauretania to the province of Tangier, governed by Count Julian on behalf of the Gothic king of Spain.

* * *

Uqba had fought his way through the provinces of Africa, Numidia and Mauretania, which were part of the Roman Empire ruled from Constantinople. His enemies had been the Romans and the Berbers. Now he was in Tangier, which was part of Gothic Spain. This was a different imperial world, and this was the first time that the Muslims were coming in contact with this world. The early Muslim geographers noted that the people of Tangier were know for their lack of intelligence,[1] but there was nothing stupid about Count Julian, the governor of the province.

According to Marrakushi[2] and most modern historians, this man was a Gothic noble acting as governor of the province of Tangier, at Sabta, on behalf of the King of Spain. Ibn Khaldun, however,[3] says that his name was Yalyan (could be Arabicised form of Julian) or Balyan or Balban; that he was a Berber king, of the tribe of Ghamara, living in the Ghamara Mountains in this region; that he inclined towards and had sworn allegiance to the King of Spain; and that he ruled the province as a vassal of the Goth. General J.F.C. Fuller, the famous British military historian of our time, gives his name as Julian or Olban and considers that he was probably a Christian Berber. Whoever and whatever he was, Julian alias Yalyan alias Balyan alias Balban alias Olban was one of the most cunning of men. He lost no time in offering Uqba a bait which the simple warrior swallowed – hook, line and sinker.

Julian was terrified of facing the advancing Muslims. Having heard how the fierce and proud tribes of Berbers, whom the Romans and Goths feared to clash with, had been broken to pieces whenever they rose to impede the Muslim advance, Julian knew that he and his army of Goths and Berbers could only oppose the Muslims at the cost of their lives. Uqba's fame as an irresistible commander and a dauntless warrior had preceded him. Tangier

1. Abdul Fida: p 133.
2. Marrakushi: p 26.
3. Ibn Khaldun: vol 4, pp 253, 399; vol 6, pp 297, 347.

and all who lived in the province trembled at the approach of this new conqueror from the desert of Arabia.

Julian at once switched to diplomacy. He sent an embassy with gifts to Uqba before the latter got to Tangier. The ambassador asked for peace and offered submission: Julian and all those living in Tangier would come under Muslim rule and accept whatever terms were laid down by the commander. All they wanted was peace and friendship.

Uqba accepted the offer and marched to the city of Tangier, approaching it as a city inhabited by a friendly people and loyal subjects. It was all very nice and peaceful. Julian received the Muslim commander and made much of him. Since he had submitted, there was no question of Uqba fighting him. He had got the city without bloodshed, having marched a thousand miles from Qeirowan to get it.

Uqba asked Julian about Andalusia (Spain). It appears that he was the first Muslim general with ideas of conquering Spain. But Julian deflected him gently, turned him southwards, where more Berbers and the most terrible Berbers lived.

"You have left the Romans behind you," said Julian. "There is none in front of you but Berbers. They are like animals. They will not enter Christianity or any other faith. They eat carrion. They eat the flesh of their cattle and drink their blood from the neck. They disbelieve in the Great God and do not know Him. And the most powerful of them are the Masamida".[1]

In much the same way might an Indian officer advising the British as they made their way to the north-west frontier of India in the middle of the 19th Century, have warned them to beware of the tribes of Mahsuds and Wazeers. But Julian was not warning Uqba. He was tempting him, egging him on. The Goths were afraid to fight the Berber tribes of the High Atlas and tried always to keep them at arm's length and in a reasonable state of satisfaction. Julian now hoped to kill two birds with one stone. He would

1. Marrakushi: p 26.

have the Berbers beaten into submission without himself getting involved and would weaken or break the Muslim power, thus ending the new threat to the Spanish province which he governed. If he had his way the two enemies of Spain would fight each other, weaken each other and perhaps destroy each other in the process. We do not know if the wily Count made an actual pact with Uqba or the extent to which he came under Muslim rule. We know that he submitted and asked for peace and Uqba accepted his submission. Historians speak of Uqba conquering Tangier, without bloodshed. It was probably some loose kind of arrangement which broke up as soon as the Muslim army moved out of sight.

Julian's strategy worked beautifully and Uqba fell into his trap. Fired by zeal at the prospect of a new challenge from the unbeliever, and finding no infidel willing to fight him in Tangier, Uqba turned south and advanced into the Mountains of Daran to fight the terrible tribe of Masamida. He was a knight of Islam seeking the pleasure of Allah.

* * *

Uqba first went and took Waleeli, a town between the present Fez and Meknes. He then marched on to the Mountains of Daran to fight the Masamida.

The Masamida (plural of Masmuda) where a large and powerful tribe comprising four main sub-divisions, namely Dughagh, Asad, Kutama and Bani Samghara, each fiercer and more violent than the other. (The Ghamara, of which Julian was chief – if he was indeed a Berber and not a Goth – was also part of this tribal group). The Masamida had remained unconquered for centuries in their mountain fastnesses and this had bred in the tribe a fierce pride and a jealous suspicion of any intruder who might enter their area. They were brave, warlike, tenacious, and possessed the alertness of a tribe always at war. They were the most blood-thirsty and most dangerous of the Berber tribes of the High Atlas. They owned and occupied the Mountains of Daran, in the province of Sus-al-Adna. There were sections of the Masamida living in Buna and Sabta also, but the major part of this tribe, which Uqba would now clash with, lived in the Mountains of Daran

This was the name then used for the mountains which comprise the centre of the High Atlas, i.e. the highest part of what is now called the Atlas Range, with peaks often rising to above 10,000 feet. (The name Atlas appears to have come into use later, as no early Muslim historian or geographer has used it.) West of these mountains the coastal plain gently came down to the sea on a broad front from Tangier in the north to the desert in the south, and this was the best and richest part of what is now Morocco.

There were two provinces of Sus in the western part of the Maghreb, comprising the Atlantic seaboard: Sus-al-Adna (the Nearer Sus) and Sus-al-Aqsa (the Farther Sus). The northern one was the Sus-Al-Adna and included Tangier within its boundaries. It ran down to about where Marrakesh was built later, and it spread to the south-east to include the High Atlas and its foothills bordering the desert. Farther southwest lay the province of Sus-al-Aqsa, which ended where the desert began.

A strategist would have marched along the coastal plain of the Atlantic seaboard. This plain offered the most suitable terrain for offensive movement; it was the richest part of the country with the kind of land an invader likes to get hold of; it had the best communications for military movement. After its occupation the invading general could deal with the difficult tribes from a position of strength, take his time, let them take their time, even leave them to enjoy their high, wild mountains. Above all, the general would avoid getting into these mountains because they formed the most difficult region for offensive manoeuvre. But the high, wild mountains were just the region into which Uqba bin Nafe plunged with his hardy warriors.

Uqba's tactical handling of battle against the Romans and Berbers had been excellent; he had won every one of those battles. He obviously knew his stuff as a battlefield commander. But either he was no strategist or he deliberately ignored strategical requirements for the sake of what he considered the overriding objective of earning merit with Allah by fighting infidels. The unbelieving Masamida were there, and that is where he would go. If strategy did not like what he was doing, strategy could . . . . . .

Uqba would soon learn that strategy could not be ignored all that lightly and that an army breaks the principles of war only at the peril of its life.

The Masamida were waiting for him. They saw him coming. They may even have been warned of his approach by the crafty Julian. They led him on. They met him as he entered their tribal area, offering a little opposition in order not to arouse his suspicions, falling back into their high mountains, never too fast, drawing him on deeper and deeper into the mountains, farther and farther from the plains. And the Muslim warriors, most of whom were from the hot, dry desert, went blithely up the cold, wet mountains without pausing to reflect. Once they were up at the highest levels of the hills of Daran, the Berbers stopped their retrograde movement. They had got the Muslims where they wanted them.

Fast-moving bodies of Berbers closed in on the Muslim flanks while others cut in behind them to sever their line of withdrawal. The Muslims found themselves in occupation of a high part of the mountainous area with the Berbers all around them, holding the passes and the routes through which human movement could take place. The tribesmen took up a string of positions, their very selection of ground making it difficult for anyone to attack and dislodge them. The Muslims were now "besieged".[1]

Luckily for the Muslims it was summer time, about mid-summer of 682. It was still unpleasant for desert dwellers to be in the cold mountains, but it would have been much worse if the whole action had been delayed and taken place in the autumn. As they were now placed, the autumn might come upon them if they were lucky enough to survive till then. The Muslims did not have much in the way of supplies. The mountainous region in which they were confined offered very little in the way of food and fodder, and foraging parties could not go far because of the Berber blockade. A decisive result would have to be gained one way or the other before many weeks had passed.

1. Ibn Khalduri: vol 6, p 217.

This was a most unusual siege. It was more of a blockade. It had been brilliantly contrived by the Berbers who had led the Muslims into the mountainous area and then formed a ring around them to prevent reinforcement and escape and to starve them into submission. The Berbers had no intention of attacking the Muslims; they knew that it would be folly to do so. If they could just hold the Muslims within the ring, prevent their getting out and stop food getting in, they would starve them into submission or starve them to death. It was a siege, but without forts, without towers and without engines of war.

The Muslims were vastly outnumbered by the Masamida who occupied every hilltop and sat across every track. Uqba realised how he had been led into the trap and reacted with characteristic violence to break the Berber blockade. He launched fierce attacks against the Berber positions but all his attacks were repulsed. The Masamida had heard what had happened to their brothers at the hands of Uqba and were determined not only to avoid their fate but also to take revenge for what their brothers had suffered. No mercy would be shown. The vengeance of the Berber was no less terrible than the vengeance of the Arab.

Uqba continued to launch his attacks to break the Berber hold on the mountain fortress, but without success. And so this unusual operation wore on. The Berbers would not come in; the Muslims could not get out. Supplies were running out. There was no question of surrender. In the first place Uqba was eager for martyrdom; in the second place the Berbers would slaughter them anyway. When the supplies ran out the end would come, and the Mountains of Daran would see at lot of martyrs going up to heaven.

Belatedly Uqba realised that it was easier to get inside a hostile tribal area than to get out of it.

* * *

It is a feature of tribal life that when not fighting outsiders the tribes fight each other; clan against clan within the tribe, tribe against tribe within the land. This happens everywhere, in all tribal societies, in all races of men. Local feuds are kept alive by

the vindictive nature of the tribal character and it takes little to fan the flames, which never go out anyway.

So it was with the Berber tribes of the Maghreb, in the two provinces known as Sus. There were three large tribes in the region, namely the Masamida, the Zannata and the Sinhaja, the last of which, according to Ibn Khaldun, was probably not Berber at all.[1] These tribes often fought one another, having nothing better to do. The Masamida and the Zannata were particularly acrimonious in their hostility towards each other. They would never let an opportunity slip to inflict damage upon the other, especially when the other tribe was vulnerable. This was part of the tribal game.

It was when the Muslims had abandoned hope of breaking out of the Berber ring and had reconciled themselves to a bitter and bloody end, that the Zannata fell upon the Masamida.

They struck at their traditional enemies in a beautifully chosen moment of vulnerability. And the Masamida, who had been exulting till the day before at the plight of the Muslims and the prospects of winning a heroic victory against a powerful army, plus vast plunder, now found themselves shattered by attacks launched by their tribal enemies from behind, while frontally they were struggling to repulse Muslim attempts at breaking out. The shock effect on the Masamida mind of the surprise attack of the Zannata was total. Hardly had the attack begun when the Masamida broke and fled in panic, melting like butter under a hot knife. For the Muslims this was an eleventh hour rescue.

Uqba was a superb combat leader. His tactical skill combined with his unflagging spirit and his considerable personal courage and prowess, made him the ideal commander on the battlefield. Now again he rose to great heights. While the day before he had little hope of survival, let alone victory, now suddenly he turned fiercely against his enemies. Without a moment's delay he threw his regiments at the fleeing Masamida.

1. Ibn Khaldun: vol 2, p 95; vol 6, p 177

The Muslim horse and foot went with gusto into their new role: pursuing and hunting down Berbers in all directions, slaughtering all but those who clearly offered to surrender, ravaging the countryside and taking what they wished as booty. In this pursuit the Zannate and the Muslims worked together as allies against the Masamida.

For some weeks the clearing operation continued, until all Masamida lands had been subdued and all the Masamida had submitted to Muslim rule. Large numbers accepted Islam at the hands of Uqba, as the Zannata had done in even larger numbers, but while the latter remained true to their new faith, with the Masamida this conversion was more a matter of political convenience. The Muslims gathered a great deal of booty.

When the troops had sufficiently rested and sufficiently fed, after the privations of their mountainous siege, Uqba decided that it was time to get on with the job of fighting infidels. He marched in a south-westernly direction. He passed peacefully through the land of the Zannata, many of whom joined his army as warriors, and got to the west end of the High Atlas Range. About here was the tribal boundary of th Sinhaja.

The Sinhaja were an even larger and even more powerful tribe than the Masamida and were believed to comprise almost a third of the entire Berber nation,[1] though only a part of the tribe lived in this western part of the Maghreb. They were Zoroastrains and were known as people of the veil because they covered their faces with scarves, with just the eyes showing. They were an extremely good-looking people, in spite of their wild and barbaric nature.

The Sinhaja rose to defend their land. They came in countless numbers and fell like flies in their clashes with the Muslims. If fighting in the Mountains of Daran had been fierce, this was even worse. This was the most bloody fighting seen in the Maghreb. Suffering defeat after defeat, the Sinhaja fell back deeper into their area as the relentless Muslim advance continued. The Berbers

1. Ibn Khaldun: vol 6, p 309.

were badly beaten in every engagement and lost heavily. And this went on through the valley of the Sus River, until Uqba got to the capital of the province of Sus-al-Aqsa, a town named Tarudant. The city fell, and the Sinhaja resistance broke.

Tarudant lay forty miles from the sea and became the forward base for Muslim operations. Here Islam was offered and accepted by thousands of Berbers. Preparations were made for future operations and spoils were gathered. Among the spoils were large numbers of Berber women from the Sinhaja tribe, and their beauty left the Arabs spellbound. The likes of such women had not been seen in the world before. It is reported that girls from the Sinhaja sold in slave markets in the east fetched 1000 gold pieces; and they were much sought after.

No opposition remained for the moment in the Maghreb. Uqba had conquered all, unless some to trouble came up between Tarudant and the Atlantic. Uqba would go to the sea. Accompanied by a cavalry detachment, he rode to the Atlantic, 40 miles away, to make his historic rendezvous with the Ocean of Darkness, as the Muslims called the Atlantic.[1]

* * *

The years 62 Hijri was coming to an end. This would be about late summer in 682. The waves of the Atlantic gently lapped the sandy beach which stretched inland for a considerable distance. A soft breeze blew from the ocean. The place was not far from the present Agadeer, perhaps a few miles south.

Suddenly a group of horsemen rode on to the beach from the east. They stopped on the beach. For a few minutes their leader looked distantly at the ocean, as if hoping to find some land to break the monotony of the watery horizon. He hesitated for a little while. Then he drove his horse forward.

The horse plunged into the sea at a gallop, splashing his way into the blue water. His pace slowed as he went deeper, but the rider forced him on. The rest of the horsemen standing on the beach looked curiously at this strange spectacle, saw the horse's

1. *Bahr-e-Zulmat.*

legs disappear in the water. The horse went on till the water had come up to his chest and flowed over the rider's knees.

The rider pulled up his horse. He dropped the reins and raised his hands as he looked up at heaven.

"O Lord," said Uqba bin Nafe, "bear witness that there is no passage. If the sea had not come in my way I would have gone on in the footsteps of Zul Qarnein, defending thy religion, fighting those who disbelieve in thee."[1]

This action of Uqba's has inspired Muslims for 13 centuries. It led Iqbal, the Poet of the East, to write in his famous poem: *The Complaint*–

"We galloped our horses into the Ocean of Darkness."

This was the farthest that Uqba was to go in his invasion of the Maghreb. He had linked the Indian Ocean with the Atlantic as borders of the Muslim world. He could go no farther.

This was the farthest that Uqba could go in his military conquest. It was also the farthest, almost, that he would go in life. His end was near, because of the treachery of Kuseila the Berber.

1. Ibn Abdul Hakam: p 199; Marrakushi: p 27. Zul Qarnein was a Slave of God, perhaps a prophet, whose journey to the ends of the earth, to the east and the west, has been described in the Quran: (18: 83-98). Some scholars wrongly identify him as Alexander the Great, who was not even a believer and never went westward of his home in Macedonia.

21

The End of Uqba

There was treachery in the heart of Kuseila the Berber. He thirsted for revenge. His proud spirit had been hurt and his dignity outraged by Uqba bin Nafe, and like the Arab, the Berber never forgave. But to understand the tragic drama which was now to unfold we must go back to Kuseila's first contact with Islam, and that takes us much farther back than the time of Uqba.

Kuseila bin Lamzam was a big chief of the Berbers. He was head of the Buranis, which was like a large tribal confederation, descended from a common ancestor, Burnus,[1] and which included the tribe of Aurba, to which Kuseila himself belonged. He was acknowledged by the Romans as Chief-of-Chiefs of the Berbers and the major representative of his race in its dealings with the empire. His position in his tribe was undisputed, and outside the tribe he was regarded as one of the distinguished nobles of the Berber race.

Before the coming of the Muslims, Kuseila was a Christian, as was the rest of his tribe. During the first Muslim invasion of Africa in 27 Hijri (648 AD) – the invasion by Abdullah bin Sad bin Abi Sarh – he came into contact with Islam and became a Muslim. Whether he and his tribe were part of the army of Gregory which was trounced at Subetula and whether he came in military conflict

1. Ibn Khaldun: vol 6, p 176.

at all with the Muslims is not known. But whatever the circumstances of his conversion, he became a Muslim, though it was a conversion in a purely formal sense and without a true change of heart.

A quarter of a century passed. In the fifties of the Hijra, while Abu Muhajir Dinar was governor of Africa, Kuseila apostatised. Those of his followers who had followed his example in becomir.g Muslims also apostatised and all went back to the Christian faith. Expecting trouble with the Muslim government of Africa, Kuseila got his tribe of Buranis together and concentrated them near Tilimsan. Abu Muhajir marched against him.

The two forces met near Tilimsan and in the battle that followed the Berbers were defeated and Kuseila taken prisoner. He became a Muslim again, and for this reason Abu Muhajir spared his life and was good to him. This was the beginning of the second Muslim period of Kuseila's life. There was still doubt in his heart and his conversion also, like his first one, was more a matter of convenience than of religious faith. His tribe again followed him into the new faith, though their religious fervour was no warmer than their chief's.

Then came the time of Uqba bin Nafe who put Abu Muhajir in his place, and put everybody else in his place too. Abu Muhajir told him all about Kuseila bin Lamzam, and emphasised that although Islam was not firm in his heart he was a prince of the Berber nation and wielded considerable influence and authority in the region. But Uqba, instead of devoting special attention to Kuseila to win him over, pointedly ignored him.

In Uqba's simple, egalitarian mind, all men were equal and a chief was chief only because he carried extra responsibilites and not because he enjoyed extra privileges. If Kuseila was not even a true Muslim he deserved even less consideration. Uqba revealed himself in a most tactless manner the day someone presented a sheep to him and he ordered that it be slaughtered for his men. He asked Kuseila to help the cooks in roasting the meat!

The Berber prince was aghast. He said: "May Allah be good to the commander. These servants and slaves of mine will do it for me."

"No!" Uqba insisted.

Kuseila stood up. He was furious. He did as he was told but the humiliation of this act left a permanent imprint upon his mind, and his indignation was shared by his fellow Berbers.

It was less than wise on the part of Uqba to treat a high Berber chief with such scant respect and insult him in the presence of his followers. Kuseila was like a king and was given by his tribe the reverence due to a king. Uqba had shown extreme tactlessness and a lack of understanding of human relations, but he saw Kuseila as an ex-apostate and even now lukewarm in his faith. He saw no reason for humouring such a man or making allowances because of his high position in the tribe.

Abu Muhajir told Uqba off for this. "It is a very bad thing that you have done," he said bluntly. "The Messenger of Allah, on whom be peace, treated with affection the powerful ones of the Arabs. You find here a powerful one among his people, in a place where he wields authority, and you insult him!"[1]

Abu Muhajir was proving wiser and showing a more mature understanding of human nature than Uqba. He also obviously had courage in as much as he expressed his opinions freely and bluntly to his master. But it had no effect upon Uqba. He paid no attention to what Abu Muhajir said and gave no consideration to Kuseila.

Kuseila's temper worsened as the days went by because of the light-hearted manner in which the Arabs treated him. He took to brooding, keeping to himself, his mind filled with dark thoughts. Whenever he was in such a mood he would pluck at his beard. Arabs passing by would ask him jokingly: "O Berber, what are you plotting?" And they would laugh. He would try to conceal

1 Marrakushi: p 29.

his thoughts and make a show of joining them in their joke. "This is very good for the hair," he would say.

An old Arab, older and wiser, passing by, understood the situation better than the younger ones. He said to them. "The Berber is warning you."[1]

But the warning fell on deaf ears. Uqba saw everything in terms of black and white; he could not see any shades of gray in between. A man or an action was either good for Islam or bad for it, and that was that. His was a simple, beautiful concept of life, and if it was not very close to reality it did not worry him. None of the Arabs, least of all Uqba, realised how strong ran the feeling in Kuseila's heart, how painful had been the insult, how unforgiving was the mood of the Berber chieftain and how deep the hostility of the Berbers towards Uqba and the Arabs.

When Uqba marched for the Maghreb, Kuseila and his Berbers marched with him. They formed part of the Muslim army. Kuseila was afraid of Uqba and was not prepared to come out in the open and let everyone know how he felt. But he nursed his grievance. For all purposes, outwardly at least, he remained loyal to his commander, and in the battles which formed part of Uqba's campaign of the Maghreb he fought bravely and proved himself a good officer.

Kuseila bided his time. His intentions were guessed only by Abu Muhajir Dinar, to whom Uqba would not listen anyway.

* * *

Uqba rode his dripping horse out of the sea and rejoined his soldiers on the sandy beach.

What he had done was an act of homage, a gesture of love and worship, a tribute of holy passion. Having rendered worship unto God, he turned his attention to the consolidation of the gains of Islam in the Maghreb. He would ensure that no resistance remained, that all the tribes were subdued, that the call for prayer went forth in every habitation and the word of God conveyed to every

1. *Ibid.*

listening ear. He rode over hill and valley with the sword in one hand and the Quran in the other.

First he marched to the eastern part of the valley of Dar'a, having left a part of his army to hold Tarudant. Dar'a is a river which flows from the High Atlas range to the Atlantic, and Uqba went to the high part of the river valley. This was part of the land of the Sinhaja, but the tribe now offered no opposition. For some weeks he operated in this mountainous region, on the eastern slopes of the High Atlas.

He went to Eegheer, then to Tarna, then to Shakir, then to the land of the Dukkala, another but smaller Berber tribe. He called the Dukkala to Islam, as he had done at all the places previously visited, but unlike the inhabitants of those places these fellows rejected the call. Uqba fought them, and it appears that it was not an easy victory. In the fighting many Muslims were killed and were buried on the battlefield, at a place which became known as Maqbarat-ush-Shuhada. .*The Grave of the Martyrs.*

Having broken the resistance of the Dukkala, Uqba climbed higher into the mountains. He got to a place called Atar, near the present Warzazate, which was the tribal area of the Haskura. The Haskura also refused his invitation to submit to Islam or pay the Jizya, and as a result were beaten and driven from their land. After this action no one fought Uqba from the people of the Maghreb.

He then crossed the upper ridges of the Mountains of Daran (the High Atlas) to Aghmat Wareeka, then descended into the Valley of Niffees, south of the present Marakash. At the top end of this valley he built a mosque. From here he crossed another high ridge to get into the Valley of Sus, which flowed into the Atlantic and on which Tarudant is situated. In this valley also he built a mosque. Then he rode south for fifty miles to the Valley of Massa, where he built yet another mosque. Massa was the last objective taken by Uqba in his campaign of the Maghreb.

Uqba had done his job. There was no opposition left. All had submitted, and those who were still unwilling to do so fled from his path. The winter was closing in. The Muslims went into camp at Tarudant to await the coming of better weather.

* * *

In the spring of 683 (about the middle of 63 Hijri) Uqba started his return journey with his army. It was an army of Arabs and Berbers, the Berbers including Kuseila the Chief. We do not know what route was taken by Uqba from the Maghreb, but he did not go via Tangier as there is no record of any further meeting with Count Julian, the wily governor of the province. Except for avoiding Tangier he probably took the same route back. He faced no problem on the way as he left the far Maghreb, passed through the near Maghreb and re-entered Africa in the region which is now the north-eastern part of Algeria.

Nobody opposed his march. Some tribes were friendly, some indifferent, many were positively unfriendly. But they avoided confronting him and watched in brooding silence as he passed. To Uqba their dimly concealed hostility was not apparent. Since he himself was pure-hearted and incapable of deceit or duplicity of any kind, he judged others by the same standards and could not tell an enemy until he stood up waving a hostile flag.

The army made a long halt at Tubna (near the present Biskra). The war was over. Everybody relaxed. The atmosphere was one of peace and satisfaction at a great job superbly done, of a nice tiredness. Most of the soldiers wanted to go home, to relax and enjoy the fruits of their victory. They had missed their families and dear ones for two years and wished to get back to them. They had marched 3000 miles, to the Atlantic and back, in 18 months, had fought scores of battles against the fiercest enemies and made them bite the dust. Now they wanted to hang up their weapons and rest their weary limbs.

Uqba let them go. They dispersed from Tubna, the bulk of the army going to Qeirowan, while some Berber clans returned to their tribal areas in the eastern part of the Maghreb. Uqba failed to notice that it was mainly the Arabs who were going away, not

so much the Berbers. Soon only a handful of loyal Arabs were left with him: 300 in all. Beside them were camped thousands of Berbers from the tirbes of Buranis, under their chief, Kuseila bin Lamzan.

The day of reckoning was fast approaching, but Uqba still did not see the danger. Abu Muhajir Dinar saw it very clearly. The disloyalty of Kuseila, his readiness to respond to Roman overtures to turn against the Muslims, his overwhelming strength compared with the small force left with Uqba, formed a clear pattern in Abu Muhajir's mind.

Then some dispute came up which led to a confrontation between the Arabs and the Berbers. What this was we do not know. Perhaps it was an incident engineered by Kuseila to test Uqba's reactions and it had the effect of bringing matters in the open. Now there was no pretence.

Abu Muhajir warned Uqba about the intentions of Kuseila. He added, "Hasten against him before his position gets stronger."[1]

It took Uqba only a few minutes to throw his small force into battle formation in front of the Berber camp. He himself stood ahead of his men with his hand at the hilt of his sword, facing Kuseila. Beside him stood Abu Muhajir, still in fetters.

Kuseila was a brave and redoubtable chief, but he hesitated. There was something about Uqba bin Nafe. Kuseila knew that Uqba played with death as joyfully as a child plays with a favourite toy.

Kuseila dropped his gaze and turned away. He left what could have been a battlefield, followed by his furiously indignant tribe.

"Why did you turn away from him."[3] his officers demanded angrily. "He has only 5,000 men while we are 50,000. His comrades have gone from him and there is no one to help him."[2]

1. Marrakushi: p 29.
2. *Ibid.*

Either the Berber officers were exaggerating the strengths of the two forces or historians made an error in recording the figures. Neither could Uqba have had 5,000 men nor could the Berbers have numbered 50,000. If Uqba had commanded 5,000 men here he would have thrashed any number of Kuseilas. And 50,000 soldiers just could not come into one camp nor be deployed in one action against a compact front formed by 5,000 defenders. The Muslims were actually 300, and just a few more; the Berbers numbered several thousands, at the moment probably not more than 5,000 men.

Uqba at once struck camp and marched to Tahuza, a little to the east of Biskra. This was a flourishing town with a large Roman population. But the Romans had heard of the dispersal of the Muslim army and as Uqba appeared in sight they saw that there was little more than a small regiment of cavalry with him. They closed the gates of the town of Tahuza. Uqba appeared near the wall with his small faithful band. The Romans on the wall hurled stones at him, and then fired arrows. He spoke of Allah and Muhammad and called them to Islam. They abused him.

Uqba pulled back from the fort. He moved a few miles to the south and pitched camp, in the open near the south – western foothills of the Aures Mountains. This was his last move.

Meanwhile Kuseila had been in touch with Roman elements. Many Romans joined him. In discussions with them and with the elders of his own tribe he agreed to seize the initiative and not let the Muslims get away. A plan was made. His army, which was mainly a Berber army with a few Roman detachments, would march to Tahuza and fall upon Uqba where he was camped with his three hundred veterans. The fact that Tahuza was in the centre of the tribal region of the Buranis – Kuseila's tribal group – facilitated his plans.

* * *

The Berbers moved like a vast horde on a semi-circular front, looking from a distance like a swarm of locusts. Kuseila had at last come out in his true colours. He was out to wreak vengeance, and the fact that his intended victim had been his commander and comrade-in-arms over nearly two years of hard, victorious cam-

paigning, made no difference to the Berber chief. He had waited for the moment when Uqba would be weak and vulnerable, and that moment had now come. At a measured pace he led his army towards the Muslims.

The Arabs stood defiantly to face the on-coming holocaust. They were mainly Companions and sons of Companions and others close to them – 300 pure, devout Muslims. There was something starkly beautiful in this situation: in the spirit of the Muslims awaiting death, in the inflexible determination of their leader to win in the right cause or die the death of a martyr, in the treachery of his opponents, in the events as they unfolded.

Uqba and his men had faced death in a hundred battles and earned great merit with Allah. Having beaten the Berbers into submission and established the superiority of the Muslim Arab in war, they were not about to bend the knee before the same Berber. One side of the battlefield was open and the Muslims could have retreated in haste to join their comrades in Qeirowan, and then come back to fight Kuseila again. In fact, this course would have been better for Uqba and for Islam in Africa; but it was not the way of Uqba bin Nafe.

He offered two *rakats* of prayer. Beside him stood Abu Muhajir Dinar. He had behaved badly with Uqba when becoming governor a dozen years before, but since then, after his own fall from rank and position, he had proved a good man and a good Muslim. He had fought bravely beside Uqba for two years, given his commander sound advice in matters of war and peace and earned no less merit as a holy warrior. Although his feet were still in fetters he had no regrets, no tears to shed.[1]

The spectre of certain death cleansed the hearts of the two men of all vindictiveness and resentment and grievance. They were about to face their Lord. The certainty of a violent and bloody end purified their spirit and revealed two very noble natures. Uqba did not wish Abu Muhajir to stay with him and die, did not wish him to even suffer any more. He ordered that the fetters be

1. Ibn Abdul Hakam: p 199; Marrakushi: p 29.

removed. "Go and join the Muslims," he said to his erstwhile prisoner. "Take command of them. I seek martyrdom."

"And I, by Allah, seek it with you," replied Abu Muhajir.

Again Uqba tried to get the fetters removed; again Abu Muhajir refused, saying, "It is Allah who has thrown me in irons."[1]

The two embraced each other for the last time. Then they drew their swords and broke their scabbards, and upon Uqba's command his men also broke their scabbards and dismounted from their horses to fight on foot: a double gesture of defiance and acceptance of death.

The Berbers hurled themselves at the compact body of the Faithful. Those in the front recoiled from the ferocious tenacity of the Muslim defence. The best of the tribesmen fell in combat under a Muslim sword, lance or dagger. They came again, pressed on. Those who fell were replaced by others as eager for blood.

The Muslims knew that this was the end; but they were determined to send many infidels to hell before their own end came.

They fought like wild animals at bay, tearing the Berber companies to pieces as they came on. There was no weakening, no flagging of spirit. In the din and dust of this savage clash at Tahuza was enacted the last glorious scene in the beautiful drama of Uqba's conquest of the Maghreb.

The ranks of the Faithful began to thin. More of them fell as the attacks of the Berbers continued. There were none left who were not wounded. More fell as martyrs. Then none remained but Uqba and Abu Muhajir, their swords and armour dripping with blood. The heaps of slain Berbers lying around them bore witness to their valour and prowess. The Berbers came on.

Uqba and Abu Muhajir were the last to fall. They lay side by side. They died as brothers in Islam, having forgiven each other and hoping for forgiveness for themselves. They joyfully drank the cup of martyrdom which both had eagerly sought.

1. Ibn Abdul Hakam : p 199; Marrakushi: p 29.

This happened in the late summer or early autumn of 683 (early part of 63 Hijri). The place where Uqba fell and was buried is now known as Sidi Uqba.

* * *

Prophet Muhammad had spoken about Tahuza in his lifetime. He had said: "In the future men from my following will be killed there, fighting in the way of Allah. Their merit will be like the merit of the people of Badr.[1] They will not change. They will come to the Day of Judgement with their swords upon their shoulders".[2]

Muslim scholars believe that this prophecy related to Uqba and his men. Perhaps Uqba had heard of the prophecy; perhaps this was the reason for his not seeking safety in flight. He was about 60 when he died, having been born in the time of the Prophet but after the Migration.

This is how Uqba had wished to die; a glorious and gory end to a life spent fighting in the way of Allah. He was one of the noblest of the Muslims, brave and virtuous, with an inflexible dedication to the cause of Islam. He was a brilliant general on the battlefield, an inspiring leader whose followers preferred death beside him to life without him. He was too good-hearted and pure to understand the machinations of his foxy Berber allies, too direct in seeking battle with the infidel to use principles of strategy which would have got him his conquests with less sweat and blood.

He was incapable of fear or falsehood. If he was tricked by others it was because of the purity of his character and his trusting nature. Those very Berbers and Romans who eventually cornered him and killed him when he was vulnerable, held him in reverence even after his death.

May Allah be pleased with Uqba bin Nafe.

* * *

There was alarm and despondency in Qeirowan. The two men left in charge of the place, Zuheir bin Qeis al Balawi and Umar

1. Badr was the first battle of Islam. Veterans of this battle were always held in the highest esteem by the Muslims who followed.
2. Marrakushi. p 30.

bin Ali, were brave officers and devout Muslims, but after the tragedy of Tahuza it was not easy to keep up the military enthusiasm of the people. There were troops present to defend Qeirowan and had they been put to the test of battle they would no doubt have given a good account of themselves, but the inspiring presence of Uqba was gone and spirits sagged.

Exaggerated reports of Berber strength and ferocity added to the confusion. Moreover, not all had been killed at Tahuza. A few soldiers, wounded and unable to fight on, had been taken prisoner. A few days later they were ransomed by the Muslim Governor of Qafsa and returned to join their comrades in Qeirowan. These fellows also spread exaggerated reports of enemy capabilities, as prisoners or those who have lost in battle are wont to do. Kuseila was seen as a monster, a fierce and unforgiving killer. This was patently unfair because all those who died at Tahuza fell fighting and the few prisoners taken were allowed their freedom on payment of ransom. But the tide of destiny was turning. There was widespread anxiety in Qeirowan. Then came news that Kuseila the Berber was coming!

Zuheir bin Qeis called a congregation of the Muslims and addressed them: "O Muslims, your comrades have gone to paradise and Allah has blessed them with martyrdom. Follow in their footsteps. Allah will give you more victories."

There was silence in the crowd, a lack of response. It appeared that not many shared Zuheir's courage and confidence. In fact there was a definite depression and a lack of enthusiasm to fight the Berbers whose numbers had been vastly magnified by rumour.

The mood of the populace was put into words by a man who was determined not to fight. This was a fellow named Hansh bin Abdullah As-San'ani. "No, by Allah," he shouted to Zuheir. "We do not accept your proposal. And you have no authority to give us orders. No action would be better for the Muslims than to save themselves from this calamity by going east."

Then he turned to address the crowd: "O Muslims, whoever from amongst you will return to the east, follow me".[1]

The fellow marched out of Qeirowan and all the soldiers followed him, despite the exhortations of Zuheir bin Qeis. Zuheir found that there was none left of the military community in Qeirowan except himself and his family. He had no choice but to follow in the footsteps of his soldiers; and he too left Qeirowan and caught up with them. They marched all the way to Barqa where they stopped and established themselves as a frontier garrison. This evacuation took place in the very end of 63 Hijri.

The Muslims were again out of Africa. They were back at Barqa; back to Square One.[2]

In Muharram, 64 Hijri (August 683), Kuseila marched into Qeirowan at the head of an army of Berbers and Romans. Large numbers of Muslims had left the city at his approach but many were still there. These people, however, understood the futility of opposing his advance and wisely offered no resistance. Kuseila knew that the Muslims were there and, contrary to what people feared, he gave them a guarantee of peace and safety. There was no looting, no pillage, no harassment of any kind.

The sun of Kuseila's fortune was at its zenith. He was master of all of Africa, with the exception of Libya. He was for all purposes King Kuseila the Berber, ruling over Berbers and Romans and Muslims, the latter being both Arab and Berber. So far as we know he proved a good ruler during the fiye years of life that remained to him.

But the tide of destiny would turn again and the sword of vengeance would flash in the African sun. His account would be settled.

1. Marrakushi: p 31.
2. In one account Ibn Abdul Hakam mentions a battle between a son of the High Priestess, who will shortly appear in our history, and Zuheir bin Qeis, in which the former was defeated and large numbers of Berbers slain. Such an action may have taken place while Uqba was fighting in the Maghreb, as an attempt by the Berbers to eliminate the Muslim base while Uqba was away. But it is unlikely to have happened, if at all. It was certainly not connected with Kuseila.

22

The Fourth Invasion of Africa

While in Africa Muslim armies were marching back and forth, battles were being fought and won, continents were being conquered and lost and a large quantity of blood was being shed, the dimension of the sea was slowly gaining in importance for the expansion of Muslim power. The Muslims were learning the skills of maritime warfare. They were building ships, often with the help of the Copts in Alexandria. Certain individual Arabs showed a flair for the sea and these individuals were rising in competence and experience as naval captains and admirals.

The Muslim naval power in the Eastern Mediterranean began to be felt as early as 28 Hijri (648-9 AD), when Caliph Muawia conquered Cyprus and levied a tribute upon its people. In the Battle of Asawida in 31, and then the great Battle of Sawari (Masts) in 34 Hijri (654-5), the Romans were met at sea in open battle and decisively beaten. In 46 Hijri (666 AD) Sicily was raided from the North African coast under orders of Muawia bin Hudeij. In 53 Hijri (this has been placed also in 52 and 54) Rhodes was conquered by a naval force under Junada bin Abi Umayya and on the orders of Caliph Muawia was settled by the Muslims. But seven years later, upon the death of Muawia, his son Yazeed ordered the evacuation of the island and the Muslims abandoned it. In 54 Hijri (674) Crete was also attacked by Junada and part of it taken, but it was evacuated soon after.

This was good progress indeed, considering the beginnings of Muslim naval power. Their first faltering steps had been replaced by bold strides. The Romans had been driven out of the Eastern Mediterranean in spite of having a larger and more experienced navy. The Muslims at sea were like killer sharks playing havoc with the Roman whale.

But the purpose of the Muslims in developing a naval force was only to defend Muslim lands and to carry out raids to destroy bases which could be used by the Romans for attack upon Muslim coasts. The real purpose of naval power, which is control of sea communications for strategical and commercial movement, was not grasped by the Muslims although its application was evident from the operations of the Roman navy. While the Romans could convey a fighting force in days from Europe to North Africa by sea, Muslim troops would march by land from Syria and Arabia, across Egypt and Libya, on a three months' caravan journey to North Africa. By sea, given favourable winds, the journey would not take more than ten days.

However, the Muslims were content with what they had achieved. They had ensured the safety of the eastern coastline and as long as they could fight Romans and earn merit with Allah, they were happy. The shark was enjoying itself in the Eastern Mediterranean. It did not feel the need for venturing into other seas.

* * *

In Qeirowan Kuseila the Berber settled down to ruling over his newly-won empire. The Romans living in Africa gave him their allegiance and among his subjects were many Muslims too, who were fairly and kindly treated by the Berber monarch.

Islam had taken a terrible blow at the tragedy of Tahuza and the subsequent evacuation of North Africa. There was widespread apostasy in the land. Large numbers of Berbers who had accepted Islam at the hands of Uqba and other Muslims generals, renounced the new faith and went back to whatever they had believed in before their conversion – Christianity, Judaism, Zoroastrianism, or just paganism. Berbers and Romans rose in vengeance against Islam and all the once conquered territories became hostile lands, with the exception of a few islands of belief in Qeirowan and other towns.

All the efforts of Uqba, all the blood and sweat spent in the cause of Islam, were wasted.

If Uqba had lived this would not have happened. And Uqba would have lived but for Kuseila the Berber. It was all this man's doing. He was an apostate, an infidel, an enemy of Allah, and would no doubt pay for his sins on the Day of Judgement.

Yet, he was a noble chief and a generous prince. He did what he did for the sake of honour, and if in securing vengeance he displayed extreme and unforgiving vindictiveness, this was a quality shared by many brave martial nations of the world, including the Arabs of the time. When honour was satisfied he acted with magnanimity and tolerance and imposed no burden of any kind upon the Muslims remaining in his realm. In fact, he guaranteed their safety. His reign, starting in the beginning of 64 Hijri, progressed smoothly. Fortune smiled upon him and bestowed her favours, but she would do so for only five years.

In Damascus a new Caliph ruled the Muslim world, *viz* Abdul Malik son of Marwan. Marwan was the rogue and embezzler whose story has been narrated in Chapter 15. Abdul Malik became Caliph in 65 Hijri (685 AD), the year following the fall of Qeirowan, but for many years he was occupied by internal problems, the biggest one being the existence of a separate caliphate in Mecca under Abdullah bin Zubeir, our hero of Subetula and Sousa. It took Abdul Malik a few years to acquire a stronger grip over national affairs before he could turn his attention to the problems of the frontier.

Caliph Abdul Malik was a veteran of Africa. He had served under Muawia bin Hudeij during Islam's second invasion of Africa and commanded the cavalry detachment which conquered Jalaula after Abdullah bin Zubeir, now his rival at Mecca, had defeated the Romans at Sousa. Abdul Malik knew Africa and it appears that he thought well of it, because when the elders of the Arabs spoke to him about Africa and asked him to liberate the land and deliver the Muslims of Africa from the hands of "Kuseila the Accursed,"[1] he did not need much persuasion. He would do it.

1. Marrakushi: p 31.

"None could be better suited," he said, "for taking revenge for the blood of Uqba from the Romans and the Berbers than one who is like him in faith and intelligence."

He asked his ministers for advice about the man most suitable for the job of restoring Africa to Islam, and all agreed that the best man was Zuheir bin Qeis Al Balawi. The ministers said, "He was a friend of Uqba and knows more than other men of his ways and plans. And he is the first of men desiring vengeance for Uqba"[1]

* * *

Zuheir bin Qeis was like Uqba bin Nafe in many ways. A devout Muslim, he was passionately eager to fight for Islam and earn merit with Allah, if possible die in the way of Allah. His greatest joy lay in service to Islam. In fact he was a very unwordly man and of a hermitic turn of mind. Simple and frugal in his living, he looked upon this world as a temptation to distract men from the true path. He was acknowledged as one of the most prayerful of men, a prince of the pious, a saint among men, though a very warlike one.

Uqba had left him in Qeirowan to govern Africa when he marched off to fight the enemies of Allah in the Maghreb, and the two never met again. After the tragedy of Tahuza, Zuheir did his best to get his men to face the threat posed by Kuseila, but with the loss of spirit caused by the death of Uqba they deserted him and sought safety in a return to Barqa. He too had to go to Barqa, and here he remained as commander of the garrison, waiting patiently for whatever God had in store for him. After five years of waiting and praying, his patience was rewarded.

Abdul Malik wrote to him and ordered him to advance to Africa with his cavalry and liberate the Muslims in Qeirowan. Abdul Malik should have known better. He had served in Africa, seen the vast geographical scale of the continent, the immense population of Berbers who could come like swarms of hornets against intruders. Zuheir could hardly reconquer Africa with a

1. *Ibid.*

few regiments of cavalry, and he had to write to the Caliph to remind him of the great strength of Berbers and Romans serving under Kuseila bin Lamzam.

In response to Zuheir's request Abdul Malik sent a large force of cavalry and infantry from Syria, well-equipped with weapons and materials of war. This was in 69 Hijri (688-689). Zuheir set off from Barqa to conquer Africa once again. He left no garrison in Barqa, which was a regrettable omission, but he felt that to conquer Africa against such opposition as he knew would face him, he would have to throw every available man into battle.

Upon coming to know of the advance of the Muslims towards Africa, Kuseila put together a large army of Berbers with a few Roman contingents, and prepared to defend his realm. He felt no fear at the approach of the Muslims. In spite of the fact that they had beaten him and overawed him in past times, he was confident of victory, especially as his army was four times as large as the army of Zuheir. He gathered the chiefs of his clans in a council of war at Qeirowan.

"I am of the opinion that we should get away from this town," said Kuseila. "In it are Muslims who have an agreement with us, and we will always worry that if we fight near them the battle will go against us. Instead we should go to . . . . . "

Kuseila mentioned a place not intelligibly recorded by historians. Then he went on, "it has water. We have a vast army. If we defeat them and drive them to Tripoli, we will completely wipe them out and the west will be ours till the end of time. And if we are defeated, the hills and forests will be close to us and we can take refuge in them."[1]

All present agreed to the proposal. Consequently the Berber army moved the distance of a days' march from Qeirowan towards the west and went into camp near the foothills. With the hills behind them their rear would be safe against outflanking movements, and in case of a reverse they could disappear in the hilly region, finding safety in its ridges and valleys.

1. Marrakushi: p 32.

Soon after the departure of Kuseila's army, Zuheir arrived at Qeirowan. He camped outside the town. For three days there was no movement; he neither entered the town nor went after Kuseila. He just rested his men while remaining on guard and finalising plans for battle. On the fourth day he struck camp and moved west, arriving in the evening near the camp of Kuseila. Zuheir gave orders that the camels be unloaded and tents pitched. There was no going beyond this point, nor going back, until one of the two armies had been shattered in battle.

We have no knowledge of the exact place where the two armies established their respective camps of the location of the battle-field. It was probably at the mouth of the Wadi Marwalbeel, near the present village of Funduq-ul-Uqbi, about 20 miles south-west of Qeirowan. It had water (as Kuseila said it had), there were hills beyond it (as Kuseila said there were), and as the historians narrate, it was a day's march from Qeirowan.

* * *

The day following his arrival, as soon as the prayer of the dawn was over, Zuheir arrayed his army for battle. Kuseila did the same. Then both generals ordered the advance. This was not a battle with one side attacking and the other defending. It was a battle with both sides attacking, and two large bodies of men advanced and clashed with each other.

It started off as a fierce contest and got fiercer and bloodier as the day wore on. It raged without a break. It went on all day with frightening ferocity, until the soldiers of both sides despaired of life, but they fought on desperately. The field of battle was littered with broken bodies. Those who lived picked their way over human corpses to slog it out with an enemy as tenacious and as fierce. The two commanders would allow no letup. One was determined to win Africa for Islam and was prepared to die in the attempt; the other was determined to keep his land free of the Muslims or die in the attempt. The generals were with their men in the thickest of the fighting and it was in the thickest of the fighting that towards the evening Kuseila was killed in combat.

With Kuseila fell a large number of officers and leaders of clans, the flower of his army, all faithful to their Commander-in-

Chief till the end. As they fell, word of their death spread in the two armies. The Muslims launched another furious assault and the Berber army, badly shaken by the death of its leaders broke into pieces. The infidels turned and fled, making for the hills. The Muslims watched their flight from the blood-soaked battle-field with a prayer of thanks on their lips.

The next day Zuheir launched his army in pursuit of the Berbers. Kuseila had wisely chosen his battlefield with a hilly region at his back to that he could withdraw to safety if necessary, but Kuseila and those who had made the plan were dead and none was left to organise the stricken army and see to its safe withdrawal. They fled singly and in groups, every man concerned only with saving himself, and as the Muslims came after them, the remnants of a once proud army turned into a panic-stricken horde.

The slaughter which occurred in the pursuit was no less terrible than that on the battlefield. Muslim cavalry squadrons fanned out in the countryside and raced westwards to catch up with their fleeing adversaries. The pursuit went on for a long time and over a long distance, until the Muslims had got to the Valley of Malwiya in the Maghreb (by the present Melilla). Then there were no Berber warriors left to kill except those who had sought safety in inaccessible areas and in distant mountain forts, away from the routes of movement, and these were ignored by Zuheir. They numbered thousands, but at the moment they were little better than frightened goats.

The Berber power was shattered, its nobles and chiefs slain on the battlefield, its cohesion destroyed. The nation of Berbers broke up into tribes and clans, the survivors thankful that they lived at all. With this defeat the Roman power suffered a setback, though it was by no means eliminated. Most of the Romans who fought under Kuseila and survived withdrew to Carthage. One important effect of this Muslim victory was that the Berbers never again placed any great reliance on Roman help against the Muslims; and all those who survived lived in terror of Zuheir and his victorious warriors.

Zuheir returned to Qeirowan and spent some time in dealing with matters of consolidation and organisation. He re-established

Muslim rule in Africa, reimposed Muslim authority in the land and restored the local Muslims to their former position as masters of the land. Zuheir knew that his work was done, that the Mulims of Africa had been delivered from "Kuseila the Accursed," and although Carthage was still in Roman hands the rest of Africa was back in the Muslim empire. Once again the standard of Islam fluttered in the North African breeze; once again the Muezzin called the Faithful to prayer in the towns of Africa; once again the law of the Quran and the traditions of the Prophet ran the administration of the land. Then Zuheir decided to return to Barqa.

Mention has been made of the ascetic and pious nature of this noble Muslim. He had come for the holy war, and for the holy war alone. He did not wish to remain as governor of a large and wealthy province where he would get involved in matters of this world, wheras he was interested in the next.

He said: "I did not come except for the holy war. I fear that this place will make me return to this world and I will be destroyed."[1]

So, having restored North Africa to Islam, he left a small garrison in Qeirowan under a deputy and set off with most of his army, rather the survivors of his army, and made for Barqa. He took his time. Had Zuheir known of the perilous situation that awaited him at Barqa he would have moved faster.

* * *

Through its agents the Roman Empire had come to know of the departure of the Muslim garrison from Barqa in a westerly direction, and later heard of Muslim operations against the Berbers. In order to pay off old debts, to settle old scores and win a few points in their half-century old conflict with Islam a conflict in which almost without exception the Muslims had got the better of them, the Romans decided to try for a quick and easy military success against Islam. The empire sent a large body of soldiers in a great many ships to raid Barqa.

The fleet landed at Darna on the coast of Libya and the troops made for Barqa. Since the city was almost entirely undefended,

1. Marrakushi: p 32; Ibn Khaldun: vol 4, p 400.

because everybody had gone to fight in Africa, the raid on the city was completely successful. For 40 days the Romans pillaged the town unmercifully, not showing the least compassion. They gathered a large number of Muslims to take away as slaves, and having satisfied their lust for plunder they marched with their loot and their captives for the coast where their vessels awaited them.

They had hardly left when Zuheir arrived at Barqa and heard the tale of woe. Without a moment's rest he set off with his soldiers for the coast of Darna, 150 miles away. It was only a small part of his victorious army which marched with him and the men were tired after their long journey, but nevertheless they made good speed and arrived at Darna to find a large Roman force preparing for a sea voyage. The Muslim captives were being pushed on to the vessels and these poor fellows also saw the Muslim army arrive upon the scene. They set up a piteous wail and cried for help. The Roman soldiers began to push them even harder into the ships.

The situation was such that Zuheir had no time to organise a proper front and make a proper battle plan. If he was to save those Muslims he would have to act immediately. The Romans, on the other hand, were waiting for Zuheir, arrayed in battle formation with a larger force than he possessed. Zuheir just ordered his regiments into the attack, in order to save the captured Muslims.

His men attacked the Romans with more spirit than order. The stronger force not only held its ground but fought a very good battle in which the fortunes of war went against the Muslims. Zuheir was killed and so were many of his best officers. The Romans won the day, and having beaten off the Muslim attack with heavy loss embarked in their vessels with their captives and sailed away.[1]

The martyrs were buried on the shore at a place which became known as *Qubur-ush-Shuhada* – the Graves of the Martyrs.[9]

1 . The outcome of the clash at Darna is in some doubt. According to certain sources, the Romans got away with their plunder and slaves; according to others they got away but just by themselves.

2. According to another version (Ibn Abdul Kakam: pp 202-3) this tragedy occurred much later, in 71 Hijri. I prefer the account of Marrakushi which I have used for this narrative. Ibn Khaldun (vol 3, p 293) also states that Zuheir was killed in 69 Hijri.

The survivors of Zuheir's army travelled to Damascus and narrated before Abdul Malik the sad end of the campaign. The Caliph was deeply distressed, not only by the military setback but also by the tragic loss of Zuheir, which was no less painful than the loss of Uqba bin Nafe. There was mourning in the Muslim world. A glorious campaign, having begun on a high note of hope and having gained a great victory over the infidels in Africa, had ended in tragedy.

As a result of the success of this Roman raid and this Muslim defeat, the Muslim power in Qeirowan collapsed. The Muslims found themselves once again back at Square One.

23

The Fifth Invasion of Africa

With the death of Zuheir on the coast of Darna, Africa was once again lost to the Muslims. There was no actual battle against the Faithful in Qeirowan and this remained a Muslim city, but Muslim power just faded away.

The Romans already in Carthage, and there were a good many of them, strengthened their independent position. The reader will recall that when the Exarch Gregory revolted against Constantinople and established his own kingdom of Africa, he moved his capital to Subetula. It was there that Abdullah bin Sad confronted him and it was there that he was defeated and killed in battle. After Gregory's death, after the return of the Muslims to Egypt, after the re-establishment of a Roman state by the local Romans under King Hubahiba, the capital had moved back to Carthage. With reinforcements and other help coming from the Empire, Carthage was a much better place for a Roman metropolis – militarily and politically.

The Berber tribes regained ascendancy in their own area. This time there was no powerful central figure like Kuseila to hold all North Africa together, but the region became as it was before, partly Roman, mainly Berber, principalities and tribal districts ruled by lords and chieftains. They shared a common hostility towards Islam and a common determination to resist with all their strength and further attempts by Islam to reconquer their land.

It was once again a Roman and Berber land, and Qeirowan was once again an island of Islam in a hostile, stormy sea.

In Damascus Abdul Malik remained occupied with internal problems, the biggest of which, as stated before, was the existence of Abdullah bin Zubeir as an independent caliph at Mecca, ruling over Arabia and much of Iraq. Slowly and steadily Abdul Malik's campaign against his rival progressed to the extent of wresting Iraq from him and cornering him in Mecca, where he was besieged by an army under the infamous Hajjaj bin Yusuf. Hajjaj did to Mecca and to the Kaaba with his catapults and fire missiles what the most hostile unbeliever would not have dared to do. In early 73 Hijri, Abdullah bin Zubeir fell in combat, sword in hand. His dead body was crucified.

Abdul Malik was now more firm in his seat. He could give his attention to the frontiers. Then the elders of the Arabs came to him and urged him to do something about Africa and find someone to defend its borders and keep its affairs in order. The Caliph agreed to do so. He even announced the name of the general who would carry out the task: "I see no one as worthy of the task in Africa as Hassaan bin Noman."[1]

Hassaan bin Noman was from the tribe of Azd, which inhabited the Uman Peninsula. He was a distinguished figure in the world of Islam. A veteran of many campaigns and a man respected for his resolution and judgement, he was known by the title of *Sheikh-ul-Ameen*, which can be roughly translated as "The Trusted Sage."

Hassaan was given a large army to command and sent to Egypt, there to make his preparations for the forthcoming campaign. To show him how serious he was about the reconquest of Africa, Abdul Malik made over to him all the revenue of Egypt for the invasion. I have let your hand free in the wealth of Egypt," wrote the Caliph to the general. "So give to those who are with you and to those who join you. Give to people. Then go out to the land of Africa, by Allah's grace and His help."[2]

1. Marrakushi: p 33.
2. *Ibid:* p 34.

More soldiers joined him in Egypt, and by the time his preparations were complete his army numbered 40,000 men. Never before had such a vast Muslim army assembled for the invasion of Africa. This was to be an invasion like none before it and bloodier than its predecessors. Hassaan understood, as did the Caliph, that if the Muslims were to remain in possession of their African conquests and not get pushed out again, they would have to utterly crush the Roman and Berber strength. They would have to inflict such punishment that the Berbers and Romans would not dare to raise their heads again.

Hassaan planned to do just that as he set off from Egypt in about the middle of 73 Hijri (about end of 692):[1] He under-estimated the resilience of the Berber nation.

After two months of marching the army arrived at Tripoli, where it was joined by other Muslims who had been earlier expelled from Africa. From here he continued his march. His arrival at Qeirowan was greeted with joy by the Muslims of the city. His coming calmed their fears, dispelled the dark clouds which threatened the Muslim island in the troubled sea of Berbers and Romans.

* * *

At Qeirowan, conscious of his strength and of the necessity of leaving no opponent unbeaten, Hassaan began to look about him for enemies to fight. "Who is the most powerful of the princes of Africa?" he asked the inhabitants of Qeirowan.

"The ruler of Carthage, the metropolis of Africa," they replied.[2]

They were right. After the annihilation of Kuseila the Berber, the Roman power at Carthage was the strongest single organised power in Africa. It boasted a large army, freshly reinforced from Constantinople. And because Carthage was the strongest hostile power, Hassaan decided to tackle it first. Once he had broken Carthage the rest would be easy. He marched to Carthage, to find it strongly fortified and strongly manned. He camped outside the ancient city.

1. There is some variation in the accounts of early historians about the year of this campaign – a variation of up to two years.
2. Marrakushi: p 34.

To his great good fortune the Romans came out of their fortifications to fight him in the open, and a battle was fought just outside the city. It led to a crushing defeat for the Romans and their Berber auxiliaries. Countless numbers were killed, including most of their champions and the flower of their chivalry, before the remnants could get back to their fortified city.

The Muslims moved up and invested Carthage from the landward side. They had no siege equipment and could find no way to breach or scale the walls of the city. So they waited, and thus a few days passed.

Then an emissary came out to see Hassaan, sent by a Roman noble named Marnaq. What he said was that if the Muslims would guarantee the safety of Marnaq and his family and allot him a piece of property which he wanted in Carthage, he would open one of the gates of the city and let them in.

This had happened before in Muslim campaigns – a traitor giving his city away to save himself. Seeing this as the simplest way of taking Carthage and putting an end to the remnants of the Roman army within, Hassaan accepted the terms of Marnaq. A date and time were fixed for the opening of the gate, and the emissary returned to give Marnaq the good news.

At the appointed time the gate was opened and Muslim regiments rushed into Carthage to finish off the last Roman resistance. But there was no Roman resistance. There was no Roman soldier in the city. The birds had flown.

After the battle outside the city the Romans had given up hope of a successful resistance. They had no desire to end their lives in bitter and bloody fighting in the streets of Carthage. So they had sailed away during the night in their large fleet of ships, some going to Sicily, others to Spain. The offer of Marnaq was a ruse to gain time for their preparations for departure and to put the Muslims off their guard.

Marnaq was there with his family to great Hassaan. He had kept his word. His trickery had enabled the Roman army to slip

out of the clutches of Hassaan, but he had said nothing about the Roman army being there. He had, literally, kept his side of the bargain.

Hassaan, like a true Muslim, kept his side of the bargain. Marnaq and his family were safe and he was given the property he had wished to possess. And since there was no fighting to be done in the city, Hassaan pulled his men out and put them in a camp outside Carthage.

Then came the news that vast numbers of Berbers were gathering at Banzart (Bizerta) and in the land of Satfura. The latter was a district lying to the east and south of Banzart, astride the valley of the Majerda, and may even have included Bizerta within its boundaries. The Berber strength was being augmented by Roman soldiers, some from other garrisons, some from the survivors of the Battle of Carthage who had got away from the battlefield and not sought refuge in the city. This concentration of Berbers promised another confrontation with the power of Islam, another battle with the Muslim army. It drew Hassaan like a magnet. He marched with his army for the land of Satfura to do to the Berbers what he had just done to the Romans.

There was another fierce battle at Bizerta in which the Berbers were decisively defeated. Again there was much slaughter, all the more bloody because of the tenacity and courage with which the Berbers fought. Those who survived the carnage found safety in flight. The Berbers went to Bone (Buna) and the Romans to Baja, where they fortified themselves against a possible Muslim advance.

Hassaan ignored these places, regarding them as no threat, actual or potential, to the Muslim power. Instead he sent his cavalry regiments out to subdue the Berber land of Satfura. In order to punish them for their opposition, to teach them a lesson they would never forget and to discourage rebellion, all towns and villages in the path of these regiments were flattened.

Hassaan took his time over this activity. He was in no hurry because there was no opposition left in this part of Africa, so far as

he knew. And thus several weeks passed. Then came the stunning news that Carthage had risen again from the dead, that it was garrisoned again by a powerful Roman army, that once again it was bristling with lances and swords. Without further delay Hassaan marched to Carthage.

What had happened was that another Roman army had sailed from Constantinople in a fleet of ships, commanded by a patrician named John. It landed at Sicily, where John incorporated into his army all the survivors of Carthage. Then he asked for help from the King of Spain who sent him a sizeable contingent of Gothic troops. And during the months that elapsed after the fall of Carthage, while Hassaan was chasing Berbers all over the African countryside and beating them into submission, John had sailed into the harbour of Carthage, reoccupied the city, repaired its fortifications and prepared himself for a long siege. The Roman was a persistent foe and had no intention of giving up the conflict while the least hope remained.

Soon after his arrival John received a welcome addition to his fighting strength. When the Berbers living in the districts around Carthage heard that the Romans were back, they flocked in thousands to the city to join the imperial forces and continue resistance to the Muslim power. Their spirit was far from broken by the punishment they had received from Hassaan. The result was that Hassaan arrived at Carthage to find himself facing another powerful force of Romans and Berbers in a strongly fortified city.

The game had to go on. Hassaan again invested the city from its landward side. He had doubts about taking the city, because the defending force was a formidable one and this time the Romans were wise enough to remain behind their fortifications. They would not come out to fight; and the Muslims could find no way of getting in. With their command of the Western and Central Mediterranean, with their safe sea lanes to Sicily and Constantinople, with regular supplies coming in, the Romans were safe and snug in Carthage.

The winter of 693 was setting in (mid-74 Hijri). Hassaan settled down in a winter camp and sent a delegation of 40 Muslims

to Damascus to explain the situation to the Caliph and ask for reinforcements.

* * *

Abdul Malik bin Marwan was the first of the Umayyad caliphs to be serious about keeping Africa as a permanent part of the domain of Islam. He had received nothing but good news from the African theatre ever since Hassaan bin Noman got to Qeirowan. Tidings of victory had followed tidings of victory, gladdening the hearts of the Faithful.

Now this delegation of forty arrived to tell the Caliph that all was not well. There had been no defeat, but the newly arrived force of Romans in Carthage, augmented by many Berber clans, could not be beaten and driven out of Africa by the forces now available to the Muslim commander. And it was just possible that the Romans would launch an offensive. If the Caliph wished Carthage to be taken, he would have to send more troops to Africa.

The Caliph certainly wished Carthage to be taken; in fact he was determined not to lose Africa. A large reinforcement was organised at Damascus and despatched with the forty delegates to strengthen Muslim forces investing Carthage. The troops arrived as the winter ended. It was now early spring in 694 (getting into the last quarter of 74 Hijri).

The arrival of fresh troops from Damascus had an excellent effect on Muslim spirits. Hassaan now felt more confident of taking Carthage and organised the construction of siege equipment, including scaling ladders. Everyone got down to it with enthusiasm, keenly anticipating the capture of the city and the booty that would be theirs. Then suddenly the Roman army came out of the city and began to form up for battle.

The Patrician John knew that with the strengthening of the Muslim force outside Carthage the balance had tilted in favour of the Muslims. They would make attempt after attempt to storm the city and one of the attempts was bound to succeed. Consequently, he decided to strike at them outside the city before their preparations were complete. Plans were made, orders given and

one morning the Romans rushed out of the fort to give battle to the Muslims.

Unfortunately for the Romans they were badly beaten and lost a lot of men before the army broke on the battlefield and came streaming back into the city. They would never come out again.

For many days, while John licked his wounds, Hassaan prepared his siege equipment. When he was ready he stormed the fort using ladders to get his men over the wall. The army got in and the soldiers rushed into the heart of the city to kill Romans. But there were no Romans to kill. Once again the birds had flown.

After his abortive attempt to break the siege, John had lost hope. He had been lucky to get back to the safety of the fort without a heavier loss. He observed the preparations of the Muslims progressing rapidly and knew that it would not be nice to lose in battle to the Muslims. One day he decided that so far as he was concerned the war was over. He ordered the evacuation of Carthage and a move to Sicily and Spain.

The evacuation took place just before the Muslim assault – a matter of luck in timing. And, typically, having used the Berbers for their own ends when they needed them, the Romans now abandoned them to the mercy of the Arabs.

They got none. The harder the Berbers fought the more heavily they lost. They fought very hard; they lost very heavily. It was only after a good deal of blood had been shed that the Berbers laid down their arms and entered captivity, from which many of them were liberated, physically and spiritually, by Islam.

When the last of the opposition had collapsed, the Muslims took the town apart. They pillaged it and collected a vast amount of booty. Then, to make sure that the Romans never came back here to start another war against Islam, Carthage was put to the torch. The flames devoured the once-great metropolis, after 15 centuries of prosperous life, and what the flames spared was knocked down by order of Hassaan. The city was completely destroyed, razed to the ground, only its ruins pointing at the glory

it had once possessed. It was to remain in silent ruin for two hundred years before a part of it was revived and prepared for re-occupation by the Fatimid caliphs.

Hassaan returned with his army to Qeirowan.[1] It was now nearing the end of 74 Hijri (spring of 694). His campaign had lasted more than a year and had been an entirely successful one. For a few days Hassaan rested at Qeirowan.

There were no more Romans left to fight in Africa. He had finished them off and driven them in disgrace from the field. But there may be other enemies about the place. He asked the people of Qeirowan who was left of the great princes of Africa, so that he could go and destroy him or make a Muslim of him.

They told him of a woman who lived in the Mountains of Auras, who was feared by all the Romans in Africa and obeyed by all the Berbers. "If you kill her," they said, "all the west will bow before you. You will have no opponents left, no enemies."[2]

She was called the *High Priestess.*

1. Some accounts speak of the conquest of Tunis by Hassaan bin Noman during this campaign, which actually means the same as the conquest of Carthage as described above. Tunis is known to have existed from ancient times, the first record of it being from the 4th Century BC. It was Berber town, alongside Carthage, and was sometimes confused with Carthage, as Muslim historians, including Balazuri, seem to have done in connection with this battle. The early Arabs referred to the western part of the built up area as Tarsheesh, which was another name for Tunis. There may have been a small action at Tunis, or Tarsheesh, as part of the fighting outside Carthage, coastal corner of Africa was at Carthage, not at Tunis.
2. Marrakushi: p 35.

24

The High Priestess

In Arabic the *Kahin* means one who can foretell the future, a diviner who has knowledge of events separated from him in time and space, who knows of things through sources other than the senses. He has a special gift of knowledge through means which would now be classified as extra-sensory. It was believed in olden times that a kahin received revelations, and in this matter he was like a prophet except that his ethical direction was all wrong. A prophet received his revelations from God while a kahin received his from Satan. But he did have this unusual gift.

Kahin also means a priest, with *Kahina* (female of Kahin) being a priestess. This lady living in the Aures Mountains was a *Kahina.* She had these uncanny powers to a remarkable degree, being both clairvoyant and telepathic, and was also a priestess, but more than an ordinary priestess. She was a spiritual leader of the Berbers, and since she combined this spiritual position with the political authority of a queen, it would be more accurate to refer to her as *High Priestess.* Muslim historians call her the *Kahina.*

She was Duhya bint Tabta bin Neiqan of the clan of Jarawa.[1] The Jarawa were a princely clan of the very large tribe of Zannata, part of which lived in the Maghreb and had saved Uqba by falling upon his enemies. This lady ruled as Queen of the Jarawa in the

1. This is Ibn Khaldun: vol 7, p 17. Elsewhere (vol 6, p 218) he names her Duhya bint Matya bin Teifan.

Aures Mountains (Jabal Auras) and was the High Priestess generally of all Berbers. She also had a fortress of Al Jamm, 40 miles south of Sousa, in which many years before she had been besieged by her enemies but had survived and won.

She was an old woman, at least middle-aged, who had been queen at this time for 30 years, but was obviously a woman of great personality and vigour and as a prophetess in her tribe was held in high veneration by all Berber tribes of Africa and the Maghreb.[1] She had two sons, the father of one of whom was a Berber and the father of the other a Greek. She cared very deeply for her sons and was anxious that they should follow in her footsteps as the leaders of the tribe.

After the death of Kuseila all Berbers accepted Duhya as the great chieftainess of the Berber nation and all became her followwers, which made her a powerful monarch. Armed with spiritual domination over the nation and acknowledged politically as the ruler of the nation, she exercised total power over the Berbers. The Kahina was indeed a formidable woman.

This, then, was the Kahina, the High Priestess, Queen of the Berbers, about whom the people of Qeirowan had told Hassaan bin Noman. If he could kill her the west would be his. He determined to kill her, and with this aim in view marched with his army from Qeirowan in the direction of the Aures Mountains. This was in about the very end of 74 Hijri (spring of 694). His movement was slow and methodical, as it had to be, because he commanded a large, well-equipped army.

* * *

The movement of Hassaan's army had hardly begun when fast messengers rode across the hills and valleys to inform the High Priestess of the Muslim movement, its strength and apparent direction. The High Priestess ordered her forces out for battle. She led an army beyond counting to Baghaya, which Uqba bin Nafe

1. Ibn Khaldun (vol 1; p 17) gives her age at this time as 122, but considering her prowess on the battlefield this figure had to be exaggerated, to at least double her actual age.

had conquered as the first objective of his Campaign of the Maghreb.[1] Believing that Hassaan wanted to get to Baghaya and fortify himself in it against her, she drove all the Romans out of the city and demolished its fortifications, making it indefensible.

She was being very aggressive. She wanted battle in the open, which was risky business considering that the Muslims had won every battle in which their enemies had come out of their defences and fought in the open. However, after demolishing the fortifications of Baghaya, she marched towards Qeirowan, planning to meet her enemy halfway and fight a great battle. She was completely sure of herself, and her men had fanatical faith in her.

Hassaan was just as sure of himself and asked for nothing better than to meet the High Priestess in the open. He marched on until he got to the Valley of Miskiana. Here, getting intelligence that the Berbers were on the move, he went into camp.

A day or two later the High Priestess also arrived in the Valley of Miskiana, in the evening, and went into camp not far from the Muslims. The Muslim camp was to the south and upstream; the Berber camp to he north and downstream. (See Map 14).

Both sides had established screens of cavalry in front of their camps to observe the other side and give immediate protection against surprise moves. When the High Priestess arrived in the valley and established her camp, the Berber cavalry showed aggressive designs and wanted a trial of strength with the Muslim cavalry, but Hassaan ordered his horsemen to avoid an engagement while still holding on to their position. Thus a premature clash was avoided. The troopers of both the screens spent the night in their saddles.

On the following day was fought one of the fiercest battles between the Muslims and the Berbers, a battle the Muslims thought they had never seen the like of before. It began in the morning and increased in ferocity as the day wore on. It raged like a terrible storm till the evening, when a decision was gained. *The Muslims were thoroughly defeated.*

1. Baghaya, which no longer exists, was near the present Khenchela.

There was frightful slaughter in this battle, and towards the end it was a slaughter of Muslims by Berbers. The High Priestess showed no mercy. She took bloody revenge for all the Berber bloodshed by the Muslims in previous battles. Towards evening Hassaan broke contact and retreated, leaving a large number of Muslim dead on the battlefield. The part of the Valley of Miskiana where this battle was fought became known, for some odd reason, as Wadi-ul-Azara (Valley of Virgins).

Reorganising his defeated army, Hassaan carried out a steady and orderly withdrawal towards the east. The High Priestess followed. This was not a pursuit but a follow-up of a withdrawal, carried out at a respectful distance. Even after their defeat the Muslims were held in awe by the Berbers and the lady did not wish to press her luck. The retreat and follow-up went on till the Muslims had got beyond Qabis (Gabes).

It was a shameful defeat. It was the only defeat suffered by the Muslims at the hands of the Berbers in a large scale battle, and it was a very bloody one. The image of Arab military superiority suffered a serious setback and Hassaan bin Noman earned the unenviable distinction of being the first Muslim commander to be defeated and driven from the battlefield by a lady general.

In this battle 80 Muslims were captured by the Berbers. The High Priestess was very kind to them and sent them all back to Hassaan except for one whom she retained with her. This was a fine young man named Khalid bin Yazeed of the Bani Qeis, whom she adopted as her son.[1]

"I have not seen a man more handsome than you or more valiant", she said to him. "You will be a brother to my two sons."

One of the early sources gives an incredible account of how she proffered her breast to him to suck, to make a son of him formally; and apparently, in the presence of her two sons, he obliged! Then she declared: "Now you are brothers."[2]

1. According to one account he was from the Bani Abs.
2. Marrakushi: p 37.

Meanwhile Hassaan got to Tripoli. From here he wrote to Abdul Malik about what had happened, and explained: "There is no limit to the people of the Maghreb. Their numbers will never end. When one tribe is destroyed another rises after it."[1]

Having despatched a fast messenger to Damascus with his letter, Hassaan continued a steady march to the east until he had arrived at Barqa, where he stopped. Some days later he received the orders of the Caliph to stay where he was and await further instructions.

He remained at Barqa as governor of Libya (Lubya) awaiting instructions and reinforcement. He would wait five years before getting them. During those five years the High Priestess, now the undisputed sovereign of the Berbers, played havoc with her realm.

* * *

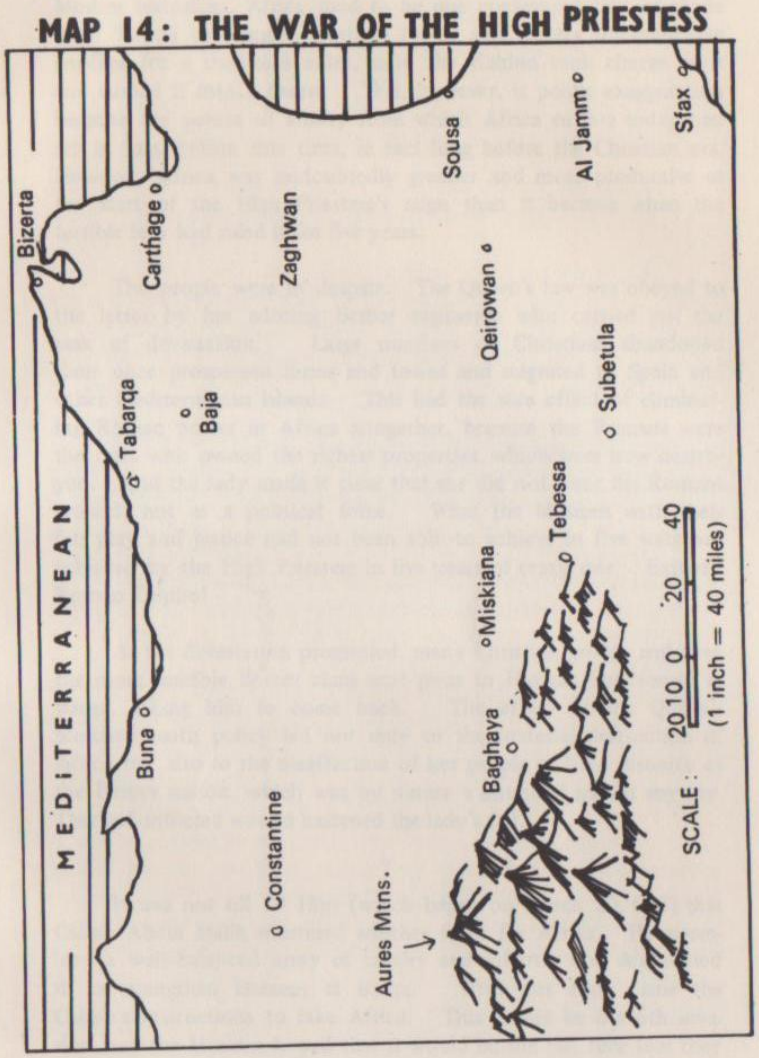
After the battle in the Valley of Miskiana the High Priestess returned to the Aures Mountains as a victorious general – the only Berber general ever to defeat the Muslims in battle. She began to govern her newly established kingdom as its undisputed ruler and an even more highly venerated spiritual head of the nation.

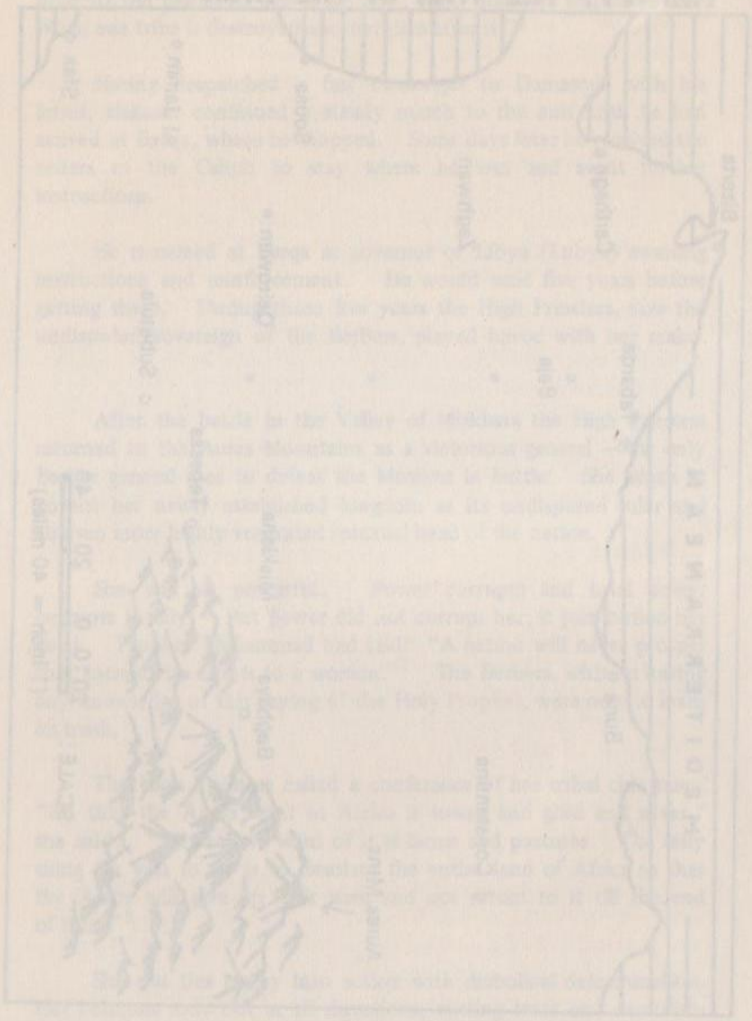
She was all powerful. Power corrupts and total power corrupts totally. But power did not corrupt her; it just turned her head. Prophet Muhammad had said: "A nation will never prosper that entrusts its affairs to a woman."[2] The Berbers, without having any knowledge of this saying of the Holy Prophet, were now to learn its truth.

The High Priestess called a conference of her tribal chieftains. "All that the Arabs want in Africa is towns and gold and silver," she said. "All that we want of it is farms and pastures. The only thing for you to do is to desolate the entire land of Africa so that the Arabs will give up their aims and not return to it till the end of time."[3]

She put this policy into action with diabolical determination. Her columns rode out in all directions, cutting trees and demolish-

1. *Ibid:* p 36.
2. Masudi: *Tanbeeh*; p 90; Ibn Quteiba: p 666.
3. Marrakushi: p 36.





ing forts and razing towns to the ground. According to early Muslim historians, Africa used to be one continuous belt of shade from Tripoli to Tangier, bustling towns and villages adjoining one another for a thousand miles, until the Kahina took charge of it and turned it into a desert. This, however, is poetic exaggeration because the period of aridity from which Africa suffers today had set in long before this time, in fact long before the Christian era. However, Africa was undoubtedly greener and more productive at the start of the High Priestess's reign than it became when the terrible lady had ruled it for five years.

The people were in despair. The Queen's law was obeyed to the letter by her adoring Berber regiments who carried out the task of devastation. Large numbers of Christians abandoned their once prosperous farms and towns and migrated to Spain and other Mediterranean islands. This had the side effect of eliminating Roman power in Africa altogether, because the Romans were the ones who owned the richest properties, which were now destroyed. And the lady made it clear that she did not want the Romans around, not as a political force. What the Muslims with their fair play and justice had not been able to achieve in five wars was achieved by the High Priestess in five years of crazy rule. Exit the Roman Empire!

As the devastation progressed, many Christian groups and even the more sensible Berber clans sent pleas to Hassaan bin Noman in Barqa, asking him to come back. The effect of the Queen's scorched earth policy led not only to the material destruction of Africa but also to the disaffection of her people and the disunity of the Berber nation, which was by nature a disunited nation anyway. This self-inflicted wound hastened the lady's fall.

* * *

It was not till 79 Hijri (which began on March 20, 698) that Caliph Abdul Malik mustered another force for Africa. He assembled a well-balanced army of cavalry and infantry and despatched it to strengthen Hassaan at Barqa. With this army came the Caliph's instructions to take Africa. This would be the 6th invasion, and the Muslims hoped that it would be the last time that they would have to invade Africa; but the Muslims had held that hope in previous invasions too.

Before setting out on the campaign Hassaan wished to know the state of his enemy. So he sent a trusted messenger to Africa to see Khalid bin Yazeed, who had lived there for five years as the adopted son of the High Priestess. Hassaan's messenger got to him and conveyed the message: "What prevents you from writing to us about the Kahina?"

Khalid bin Yazeed wrote on a piece of paper: "The Berbers are disunited. They have no order and no organisation. Move fast!"

He put the paper in a lump of dough and baked it into a loaf of bread. He placed the loaf with other food prepared as provisions for the journey and gave it all to the messenger, telling him not to break or eat the loaf because of what was in it. The messenger set off for Barqa.

Hardly had he left the capital of the Queen when she came out with dishevelled hair. She beat her breast and wailed: "Woe to you, O Berbers, your sovereignty has gone with what men eat!"

Her men spread out in the land, looking for the Arab messenger, but he succeeded in evading capture and got to Barqa, where he delivered the loaf to Hassaan. Hassaan broke it open and read the message. The paper had been partly spoiled in baking but he understood its contents all the same. He wished to send the messenger back to Khalid bin Yazeed for more information but the man protested: "That women is a diviner. Nothing of this is hidden from her."[1]

Hassaan let him stay.

* * *

Again the Muslims marched for Africa, with great hope and in great strength. For weeks the journey went on, through Tripoli, through Gabes, headed for the Aures Mountains. The Muslims were quite close to the mountains when the High Priestess came out with her Berber hordes. At the foot of the hills, somewhere between the foothills and the Valley of Miskiana, she went into camp, not far from the Muslim camp.

1. Ibn Abdul Hakam: pp 200-1; Marrakushi: p 37

As night fell she said to her sons: "I am killed." She told them that in a vision she had seen her severed head placed before the ruler of the Arabs who had sent Hassaan bin Noman.

Khalid bin Yazeed pleaded with her to surrender, to come with him and make her submission before the Muslim commander. She refused to do so.

Then she turned to her two sons: "O my sons, what do you see in the heaven?"

"We see a red cloud," they replied.

"No, by my Lord", said the Queen, "it is the dust of the Arab cavalry".

Now she turned to Khalid. "It is for this day that I made you my son. I am going to be killed; and I entrust my two sons to you". She directed him to take her sons to Hassaan and ask his protection for them. Khalid explained that if she herself did not submit the Muslim commander might not accept the submission of her sons, but she assured him that he would. In fact she went on to predict that they would rise to become great men under the Arabs.[1]

During the night Khalid left the Berber camp and accompanied by his two foster brothers entered the Muslim camp, which was not very far. He told Hassaan of the request of the Berber chieftainess, adding his own recommendation, which was accepted by the Muslim commander. The sons of the Queen were safe. For the time being, however, he put them under guard and sent Khalid to command a Muslim cavalry regiment.

On the following day was fought the second battle between Hassaan and the High Priestess. She was not as strong as before because of the disaffection and disunity created in her nation by her own actions, but nevertheless the Berbers put up a hard, if futile resistance. This time the issue was soon decided. The Berbers were defeated and the High Priestess slain on the battle-

1. Ibn Abdul Hakam; p 201; Marrkushi: pp 27-8.

field, as she herself had predicted. The place where she fell came to be known as "the Well of the Kahina".

Hassaan penetrated the Aures Mountains and subdued all the clans living in the area.

* * *

The Berber chieftains came in large numbers to submit to the Muslim commander and ask for peace. They had had enough of war and misery, at least for the time being. After the devastation caused by their Queen and High Priestess there was nothing they wanted more than peace. They were now fully prepared to end their war with the Muslims, to accept the Muslims as over lords and get down to normal, peaceful, prosperous living.

Before accepting their submission Hassaan laid down two conditions: they would accept Islam, and they would raise a military force of 12,000 men to be ready at all times to take the field and fight the wars of Islam on the orders of the Muslim Commander-in-Chief. The Berbers – and these were mainly the clans living in the Aures Mountains and the province of Carthage – accepted these conditions without reservation. They became Muslims; and they organised a force of 12,000 Berber warriors to fight under overall Muslim command.

Hassaan placed the elder son of the Kahina in command of this Berber force and also appointed him chief of the tribe of Jarawa and governor of the region of the Aures Mountains.[1] This young man proved a loyal subject a true Muslim and an able officer. He and his Berber contingents fought bravely in several expeditions which were launched by Hassaan to deal with pockets of resistance, mainly recalcitrant Berber clans which were taking their time to make up their minds.

Having seen to these immediate problems of security in relation to the Berbers, Hassaan returned to Qeirowan. Here he set himself up as governor of Africa and reorganised the administration of the province. A tax was imposed upon all Christians and other

1. According to one account he appointed each of the Queen's two sons as commander of half this force, i.e. 6,000 men for each.

non-Muslims in Africa: mainly Romans and Berbers from the tribal group of Buranis (Kuseila's people) who clung for a long time to the Christian faith. Thus many years passed in peace and tranquillity.

* * *

There is some uncertainty about the duration of Hassaan's rule as governor of Africa. There is mention of it ending in 82 Hijri (701 AD), which is likely, but there is also mention of his seeing Waleed bin Abdul Malik at Damascus, which is unlikely, because Waleed did not become Caliph until 86 Hijri, when his father Abdul Malik died at the end of a 20-year reign. He may, however, have seen Waleed while the latter was still heir apparent. In the absence of more definite evidence we take 82 Hijri as the probably year of his dismissal.

In this year, eight years after he had killed the Queen of the Berbers, Hassaan was dismissed by the Governor of Egypt who also had Africa under him as part of his governorate. This man was Abdul Aziz bin Marwan, a brother of Caliph Abdul Malik and son of the evil Marwan. He was just as evil and avaricious as his father. He dismissed Hassaan from office and summoned him to Egypt.

Hassaan knew what Abdul Aziz was after – wealth and women. He had a large caravan of camels and horses prepared for the journey, carrying slaves and slave-girls and goods of all kinds, which all fell in the category of the state's share of war booty. Officially all this was meant for Damascus and the Muslim state, but Hassaan feared the worst at Fustat. Consequently he had the best part of the booty, which was a large collection of precious stones and gold ornaments (pounds of them) put in a waterskin. This bag, looking for all purposes like a skin bag with water for the journey, was carried by a trusted attendant moving close to Hassaan.

Upon arrival at Fustat he went to pay his respects to the Governor. As a present he offered the governor 100 girls from princely Roman and Berber families.[1] Girls of such extraordinary beauty could not be purchased in the east for 1000 gold pieces.

1. According to Ibn Abdul Hakam (p 202) there were 200 of these girls.

Abdul Aziz asked to know of everything that Hassaan had brought with him from Africa. *And he took everything.*[1] Hassaan left Fustat with nothing more than a simple, common waterskin. Accompanied by a few faithful followers, he travelled to Damascus.

There he complained bitterly to the Caliph about what had been done to him by Abdul Aziz bin Marwan at Fustat.[2] The Caliph soothed his ruffled feelings. Then Hassaan sent for his waterskin and tore it open, scattering on the floor his marvellous store of gems and ornaments of gold. The Caliph gazed spellbound at the breath-taking sight.

When he had found his speech, he thanked Hassaan profusely for the gift. In all truthfulness and modesty Hassaan replied: "I only went out as a holy warrior fighting in the way of Allah. It is not men like me who cheat Allah or His Caliph."

The Caliph promised to restore him to his command but Hassaan had had enough of high office. He had earned more merit with Allah than a thousand men could earn in a lifetime. He had been the commander of the fifth and sixth invasions of Africa but different from his predecessors in that he had conquered not to give up again but to keep. He had brought the Berbers into submission and established an administration in Africa that would endure. He needed no more glory and sought no more office.

He was quite blunt in declining the caliph's offer: "I shall never again take office under the Bani Umayya," he declared.[3]

After his return from Africa Hassaan went into retirement; and died soon after.

May Allah be pleased with Hassaan bin Noman, the *Trusted Sage*!

1. Marrakushi: p 39.
2. This complaint may have been made to Waleed bin Abdul Malik.
3. Marrakushi: p 39.

25

Musa bin Nuseir

Caliph Umar once wrote to a certain scholar and asked him for a description of the lands under Muslim rule or adjacent to the Muslim state. The scholar replied:

> "Know, O Commander of the faithful, that Allah Most High has divided the earth into regions; the east, the west, the north, the south. The region which is easternmost and cleaves to the place of the rising of the sun is distasteful because of its burning and the fire and heat, and it burns those who enter it. The region which is westernmost also harms its inhabitants in proportion to the harm which comes to those who go to the eastern extreme. The region which is northernmost harms by its cold and ice, causes calamity to the body and leaves a heritage of sorrow. And whoever goes southernmost is burned by the heat and suffers at the hands of wild creatures."

The scholar then went into a brief description of several countries. When he came to the Maghreb, he wrote:

> "As for the Maghreb, it hardens the heart and brutalizes the temper. It makes the mind unsteady and drives away mercy; it increases valour and dispels humility. There is treachery in its people, who are abominable and deceitful. Their intentions are never friendly. Their land varies, but in the end of time there will be great news for their land,

and big events, resulting from a matter which will become manifest in shining circumstances."[1]

This rather exaggerated picture of the Berbers and their land and the cryptic promise of good things to come was known to the Muslims. They now even had personal experience of some of the Berber qualities described by the scholar – the hardness of spirit, the fierce independence which made them difficult to subdue, their courage and tenacity in battle. In the past Muslim generals had tried to deal with the Berber character with a strong hand but tempered with Islamic justice and generosity. The last three Muslim commanders had been noble and pious leaders who rejected the good things of this world in favour of the promise of the next. In the future it would not be so. The generals would still strive to spread Islam and serve Muslim causes, but they would also smile upon the good things of this world, especially in the matter of wealth and slaves. The next man to command in Africa was Musa bin Nuseir.

In 12 Hijri, in the time of Caliph Abu Bakr, the Muslims conquered Iraq for the first time under the illustrious Khalid bin Al Waleed. During the course of his campaign he captured the fort of Ein-ut-Tamr, in western Iraq, where the Muslims found a religious school or seminary in which 40 Arab boys were being trained for the priesthood by Christian clergymen. The school was disbanded and the boys were taken away as captives, or slaves.

One of these boys was named Nuseir, who came from the Arab tribe of Lakhm, a noble tribe which had provided families which sat upon the throne of the Lakhmid kingdom of Hira in Iraq.[2] He grew up to become a personal bodyguard of Caliph Muawia and later entered the service of Abdul Aziz bin Marwan, who was the governor of Egypt who dismissed Hassaan bin Noman. In due course Nuseir was freed but remained in the service of the Umayyad family.

In 19 Hijri, Nuseir became the father of a boy whom he named Musa. Musa grew up straight and tall, a strongly-built young man

1. Masudi: *Muruj*: vol 2, pp 61-2.
2. Some accounts say that Nuseir was from Bakr bin Wail, also an Arab tribe of Iraq.

with intelligence, vigour and ambition. He also developed a liking for the good things of this life. He took to the military profession and became a warrior, apparently a very good one, and took part in several naval expeditions including Muawia's conquest of Cyprus. He continued to rise in the estimate of the ruling family and became closely attached to them. When Abdul Malik bin Marwan became Caliph in Damascus in 65 Hijri, and soon after appointed his brother Abdul Aziz as governor of Egypt, Musa bin Nuseir was already in the good books of both, especially the latter with whom he shared a strong bond of mutual affection and whom he served for many years.

In 73 Hijri, Caliph Abdul Malik appointed his brother Bashr as governor of Basra, and having knowledge of the ability and intelligence of Musa, sent him with his brother as an administrative assistant to oversee matters of revenue. Bashr lasted only two years as governor until Hajjaj bin Yusuf became governor of all Iraq, but Musa remained at his post to deal with the revenue of Basra.

Some years passed. Then there was an allegation of embezzlement against Musa. He was charged with keeping part of the revenue of Basra for himself and apparently a lot of money was involved. Hajjaj swore that he would not get away with it. And Musa, knowing how beastly and pitiless could be the punishment of Hajjaj, fled for his life. He came to Fustat and took refuge with his friend and patron, Abdul Aziz the Governor.

The Caliph also came to know of what Musa had done. He was furious and wanted to have him executed,[1] but the ex-revenue official was saved by Abdul Aziz. The Governor of Egypt took Musa with him to Damascus and pleaded his case with such eloquence and zeal and extolled so forcefully the virtues and past services rendered by Musa, that Abdul Malik let him off with a fine of 100,000 dinars. Musa could only pay half of this amount (he only had 50,000 gold pieces to give), so Abdul Aziz put up the rest from his own pocket.[2]

1. Ibn Abdul Hakam: p 203.
2. Marrakushi: p 40.

This event would be in about the late 70s of the Hijra, perhaps 80. Musa went with his benefactor to Fustat and remained there in his service. He was a great asset to the Governor because of his administrative talent, his intelligence and capacity for work and his complete personal loyalty to his master. The Governor even used him as commander of a military detachment to crush a revolt of the Berbers at Darna, near Barqa; and Musa did the job with extreme efficiency, dealing the rebels a blow which drove all thought of rebellion from their minds for a long time. This was his first experience of the Berbers.

In early 83 Hijri (702 AD), when Hassaan bin Noman was dismissed and out of the way, Abdul Aziz appointed Musa as governor of Africa and sent him off to take charge of his new province. The Caliph was not consulted but acquiessed in the arrangement, although he was disappointed at the removal of Hassaan.

Musa travelled with an escort and with many of his sons to Qeirowan. As he entered the borders of Africa a sparrow came and sat upon his shoulder. He caught the sparrow, cut its throat, rubbed its blood on his chest and beard and sprinkled what remained of the blood all over himself. Then he cried: "This is victory, by the Lord of the Kaba!"[1]

This was an augury for Africa, and for the Berbers.

* * *

Musa was to treat a lot of unbelieving Berbers like this sparrow. He started his campaign with an expedition against Zaghwan, a town and district 40 miles south of Carthage. He himself stood off from the town and sent in a force of 500 horse to take it, which the force did without much trouble, bringing in 10,000 captives, which was most of the Berber population of the town. Then he sent two of his sons, Abdullah and Marwan, to scour the countryside, fight those who resisted and bring in those who surrendered. After a few weeks of light operations both young men returned as victors, each one bringing in 100,000 captives!

Musa then marched with his army to Sajuma, a town near the place where Uqba bin Nafe had been killed by Kuseila's people.

1. *Ibid:* p 41.

Here also the Berbers were beaten into submission and their chief killed. Two sons of Uqba were present in Musa's army and he gave them permission to take revenge for the killing of their father, with the result that many of those who had been part of Kuseila's army and had shared in the killing Uqba and his 300 loyal warriors at Tahuza, were killed as an act of vengeance.

This was followed by extensive punitive action against certain sections of the Berber tribes of Huwwara, Zannata and Kutama, who had risen again after the dismissal of Hassaan bin Noman and shaken off Muslim rule. After several months of campaigning in the region of Africa, the resistance of these rebellious tribes was broken and they were once again brought into line. Tens of thousands of them were taken as captives, and with an enormous trail of priosners following him, Musa returned to Qeirowan. It was still 83 Hijri.

Never before has such vast booty been collected in Africa by a Muslim general. One-fifth of this had to be sent to Damascus as the share of the state, and one-fifth of just the captives taken by Musa came to 60,000 souls. When Musa wrote to Abdul Aziz about the number of captives being sent from Africa, the scribe who actually wrote the letter made an error in writing the figure and gave it as 30,000. Even this was an unbelievably large number and the Governor suspected an error of the pen. He wrote accordingly to Musa, who replied that there had indeed been an error of the pen and that the correct figure was 60,000. The Caliph on hearing of this, thought that there was something wrong with Musa's head and would not believe the result until he saw the captives being brought in.

The Muslims in Fustat and Damasus were astonished at what looked like an endless procession of Berber captives of both sexes and all ages, many from noble families, being led in from Africa. They regarded this as proof of the success of the Muslim campaign in Africa under the new Commander-in-Chief. And indeed it was a success, as seen by Musa and the sons of Marwan who ruled at Damascus and Fustat.

* * *

For two years Musa ruled Africa from Qeirowan and did a very good job. Then, in 85 Hijri, his friend and benefactor, Abdul

Aziz bin Marwan, Governor of Egypt, died, much to the relief of Caliph Abdul Malik who was his elder brother. The Caliph had been fed up with him and thought to dismiss him from his office but his advisers dissuaded him from this act on the plea that the fellow was about to die anyway, from natural causes. Upon the death of Abdul Aziz, the Caliph appointed another brother, Abdullah, as governor of Egypt with suzerainty over Africa.

Another year passed and a few months more. Then late in 86 Hijri (705 AD), Abdul Malik also died and was succeeded by his son Waleed. The new Caliph wrote to his uncle, the Governor of Egypt, instructing him about a new command arrangement which he was making with regard to North Africa. Henceforth the authority of the Governor of Egypt would be confined to Egypt and Musa would be directly under the Caliph at Damascus. Moreover, Musa would now be regarded as governor not only of Africa but also of the Maghreb, which actually was not at the moment under Muslim control.

Since now he was Governor of the Maghreb also, Musa must govern the Maghreb. And since the Maghreb was not under Muslim control, Musa must bring it under Muslim control. To that end preparations were begun. In early 88 Hijri (707 AD), Musa set off from Qeirowan with a large army and many sons to conquer the west.

His march to Tangier was opposed by several Berber clans but all were driven off the Muslim route of advance with heavy loss. Finally, the Berbers left his path and just melted away at Musa's approach. He got to Tangier where Julian again submitted to the Muslim commander as he had submitted to Uqba a quarter of a century earlier. Tangier was once again taken without bloodshed.

From here Musa advanced into the two provinces of Sus as Uqba had done. The terrible Masamida who had nearly annihilated Uqba's army offered no resistance this time. Musa's sons and a freedman named Tariq led the advance of the Muslim columns into the High Atlas, and all of the Maghreb was taken, down to the valley of Sus, at the western end of which Uqba had

ridden his horse into the Atlantic. The Berber tribes of the west submitted to the columns of Musa.

Then he returned to Tangier and established Muslim rule over the city and district on a more permanent basis than Uqba had done. Julian moved to Sabta (Ceuta) at which was the actual crossing to the great rock in Spain which was later to be called Gibraltar. Julian's position is not quite clear. He may have been under Muslim rule but enjoying some kind of local autonomy, or he may have been independent of Muslim rule and directly under Spain, with the Muslims accepting this as a more convenient arrangement than attacking the well-defended fortress of Sabta. The presence of Julian at Sabta was actually a blessing in disguise, because he was to be instrumental a few years later in laying the tracks for the Muslim invasion of Spain.

Musa appointed Tariq as Governor of Tangier and Sus, i.e. the region which is now Morocco. Tariq took up his residence at Tangier with a force of 17,000 Arabs and 12,000 Berbers.[1] Many of the Berbers in Tariq's force were from the tribe of Masamida whom Musa pressed into service under Muslim command. Musa also ordered the construction of mosques and the appointment of religious teachers in the Maghreb for teaching the Quran to the Berbers and making good Muslims out of them. When the Berbers took to Islam now it was for the last time; there would be no more apostasy – not seriously.

The reader should make a mental note of the new Muslim Governor of Tangier. He was a Berber named Tariq bin Ziyad, from the tribe of Nafza which inhabited the district of Sabta. He had been a slave of Musa but was now a freedman; and he was to become one of the most romantic conquerors in Muslim history.

Having seen to various matters of administration and organisation at Tangier, Musa returned to Qeirowan. He had got the Maghreb and was now truly Governor of Africa and the Maghreb. The last of the Muslim wars for North Africa was over.

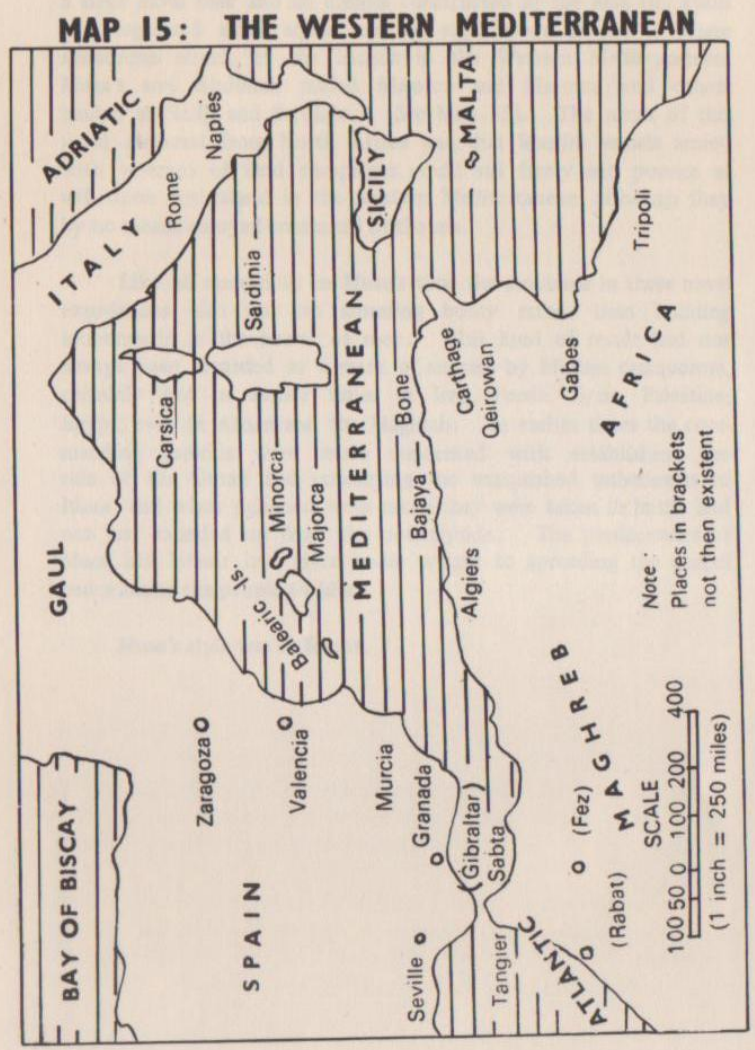
* * *

1. Ibn Khaldun: vol 6, p 220. The figure of the Arab contingent is probably exaggerated.

Musa next directed his attention to naval operations. He had a large naval base and an arsenal constructed in the area of Tunis and organised small squadrons for expeditions at sea. These squadrons struck at the islands in the Western Mediterranean. Musa's son Abdullah raided Majorca and Minorca and others landed at Sicily and Sardinia. (See Map 15). The result of this naval outburst from North Africa was that Muslim vessels armed with veterans of land campaigns could sail freely and pounce at will upon any island in the western Mediterranean, although they by no means enjoyed command of the sea.

Like all operations in Musa's time the emphasis in these naval expeditions also was on amassing booty rather than building monuments in the hearts of men. This kind of result had not always been regarded as a mark of success by Muslim conquerors, certainly not in earlier times in Iraq, Persia, Syria, Palestine, Egypt, even in Africa and the Maghreb. In earlier times the commanding gererals were more concerned with establishing the rule of the Quran and converting the vanquished unbelievers to Islam; and when prisoners were taken they were taken in battle and not just rounded up from the countryside. The predecessors of Musa bin Nuseir had given more weight to spreading the gospel and winning the people to Islam.

Musa's style was different.



26

A Pause for Reflection

Having come this far in our narrative of conquest, we have got to the threshold of one of the greatest and most epoch-making events of Muslim history, viz. the conquest of Spain. This event led to eight centuries of Muslim rule over Spain, sometimes over all of it, always over part of it – one of the most romantic and most glorious eras of human history, and one with the most tragic ending. But a description of that event must await the next work of this writer's pen, the fourth volume of this Muslim military history.

The present volume had as the limit of its scope the completion of the conquest of North Africa, which in turn was to act as a springboard for the launching of the Spanish venture. And the reader has already been introduced to the leading personalities involved in that launching: Musa bin Nuseir, Tariq bin Ziyad, Count Julian. But we must pause to digest what we have covered so far in Part II of this book. There is a lot to digest.

It might appear to the casual reader that the Muslims kept going aimlessly in and out of North Africa, back and forth and back and forth, as if some blind impulse drove them in and a counter impulse drove them out. We must pause to reflect upon these movements, the see-saw campaigns of the Muslims in North Africa. We must try and see the military sense of all this; and there was not always military sense behind these movements. We must try and understand the reasons behind these military ventures; and

these varied. We must get some idea of the generalship displayed by the Muslims, the overall design of which these campaigns formed part, how well the campaigns were conducted, how well the bloodshed was justified, how well the outcome fitted into the design.

We do not have very much to go on. There is not a great deal of detail available about the campaigns and battles, and what is available has been described into this volume, with a coordination of early accounts which often vary and at times conflict. What is written in this chapter, therefore, is an estimate, a brief analysis of the conquest, to place before the reader a military perspective upon which he may further reflect.

Reading the accounts of ten campaigns in as many chapters, following closely one after the other, might give the reader the impression that all this was one war. This is an illusion. It was not one but ten separate wars, spread over more than half a century, connected only in the sense of geographical location and of the enemy being the same – the Muslims on one side and the Berbers and Romans on the other. (In our own time we have seen the First World War, the Seond World War and the Korean War fought within a time span of 40 years, with the belligerents often the same. Yet, we never think of these three major wars of our century as one war.) It is our distance in time from the 7th Century and the fast narrative of these chapters which create the illusion that all these Muslim operations were part of one single war.

We must bear in mind that time and space are interrelated; in matters of movement one is relevant only in relation to the other. Fifty years of the 7th Century was a longer period than the entire hundred years of the 19th and 20th. Space has shrunk; the world is now a smaller place. Time has shrunk; a journey which then took three moths can now be completed in three hours. Today a division can be airlifted over 3000 miles in a few days. Then it took a month for a fast messenger to travel from Africa to Damascus and four months for a body of troops to travel from Damascus to the Maghreb.

In terms of space Damascus was over 3000 caravan miles from Carthage. It was about as far from Damascus to the borders of

China, and that was far enough away for the Holy Prophet to imply that China was at the end of the earth, to which Muslims should be prepared to travel in quest of knowledge. The Maghreb was at the other end of the known world. Muslims setting out from Arabia would know about as much about the Maghreb as we now know about Mars. In between were deserts and mountains unchartered and unknown to man.

This is the time and space background against which Muslim operations in North Africa should be judged. They should also be judged against the military knowledge and ethics of the 7th Century, not of the 20th. It is a common error made in our time to impose our ideas of sense and ethics upon a people with different standards, living in an age when many of these ideas were just not relevant.

* * *

The external politico-military thrust of Islam was stronger in lands bordering the Arabian heartland than in regions farther removed. As this thrust went into farther lands it lost momentum. Interest dwindled. Only the more far-sighted and more resolute of the Muslim leaders could see the virtues of penetrating deeper into the external world.

This politico-military thrust was ably directed by Caliph Umar, in whose time most of the lands around Arabia were conquered. He sustained this thrust until the Muslim state had acquired manageable borders from the point of view of geo-political stability – the Arabian peninsula, Egypt, Palestine, Syria, Persia and parts of Armenia. To some of the military ventures of his time Umar only reluctantly agreed, but having agreed he pursued his objectives with unrelenting determination. Once he had acquired the right borders, he put a stop to further military expansion and held his generals back with a strong hand.

After Umar, for the next half-century, the Caliphs were burdenied with internal discord. The Muslim state was plagued by civil war. This ended with the death of Abdullah bin Zubeir, Caliph at Mecca in 73 Hijri (although revolts and bloody uprisings went on), and after this Caliph Abdul Malik bin Marwan was able to devote more attention to external conquest. His aims, how-

ever, were purely political, compared with the religious inspiration of the first Four Caliphs.

The motives underlying the African expeditions varied with the Caliphs who launched them and the generals who led them. These motives fall into three broad categories, some less tangible than others.

First, there was the destiny of Islam. Every great movement has a destiny which must fulfil itself, an impetus which must expend itself, and all obstacles that stand in its path must fall as if pulled down by an unseen hand. This applied with especial force to Islam – the last, the greatest and the most dynamic of the God-inspired religions.

Then there was the religious spirit linked with the factor of destiny, which gave beauty and romance to Islam's military ventures. In spite of the decline of religious motivation with the abdication of Imam Hassan in 41 Hijri and the assumption of the caliphate by Muawia, the world of Islam was full of "slaves of Allah", who saw no ideal more worthy than service to Islam and who sought merit with Allah by fighting the enemies of Allah. The finest examples of this religious motivation were Uqba bin Nafe, Zuheir bin Qeis and Hassaan bin Noman. They were unworldly generals fighting worldly wars, and their armies boasted thousands of believers with motives as pure and as noble as their own. But this spirit manifested itself more in the armies which fought in North Africa than in the governments at Damascus which launched those armies.

The last factor, and by no means a minor one, was plunder. Since soldiers did not receive regular pay, and this was common practice in much of the world at the time, what the soldiers took in battle amounted to their pay. The prospect of booty was undoubtedly a factor that drew Arab warriors to Africa, but it was not a dominant factor. All soldiers were volunteers; they were not pressed into service and did not have to go to the front. The idea of an Arab from the Hijaz leaving home, often without his family, and going 4000 miles away through some of the most inhospitable country in the world, to fight some of the most bloodthirsty adversaries in the world, with the likely possibility of never seeing home

again, just for the chance of acquiring booty, does not make sense. Plunder was one factor, and nothing more.

The very first expedition to North Africa – that of Abdullah bin Sad bin Abi Sarh in 27 Hijri – was motivated by a desire for plunder, pure and simple. Caliph Usman sanctioned the expedition because it would bring in more money for the treasury at Madina and because it was simpler to let a persistent fellow like Abdullah bin Sad have his way.

The second expedition, in 45 Hijri, was a half-hearted attempt by Caliph Muawia, almost an exploratory measure, to have a crack at Africa once again. He never told his general, Muawia bin Hudeij, to establish permanent Muslim rule in North Africa. And Muawia bin Hudeij contented himself with winning a victory over the Romans and collecting a great deal of booty before returning to become governor of Egypt, which post he valued more than leading military expeditions into foreign land. These two generals – Abdullah bin Sad and Muawia bin Hudeij – had no great religious or moral stature.

The third expedition, in 50 Hijri, was a more serious attempt by Caliph Muawia to take Africa and incorporate it into the domain of Islam. This time he chose the right man to command the expedition – Uqba bin Nafe. However, petty politics and partisanship on the part of the Governor of Egypt, resulting in Uqba's dismissal and replacement by a favoured but less deserving subordinate, delayed the westward progress of Muslim arms. The campaign of the Maghreb by Uqba after his restoration, was entirely his own idea and inspired by the sole desire to serve Islam and spread the word of God.

Uqba's successful campaign in the west established a commitment which could not be reversed. The fourth invasion, in 69 Hijri, by Zuheir bin Qeis, and the fifth and sixth, in 73 and 79 Hijri, by Hassaan bin Noman, were in the nature of a restoration and re-establishment of Muslim rule. It was Uqba's campaigns which formed the high water mark of the conquest, not only because he fought the hardest and went the farthest but also because after him there could be no going back or staying back.

The appointment of Musa bin Nuseir had no great purpose behind it. It was an event of chance. The last of the army commanders in the conquest of North Africa, and the one who was to acquire the most lasting fame because of Spain, he actually just slipped in. Had he not been suspected of embezzlement, history would never have heared of him and he would have ended his days as an obscure revenue official in Basra. It was his fear of Hajjaj, Governor of Iraq, that led him to flee Basra and seek the protection of his patron in Egypt, which in turn led to his appointment as Governor of Africa. The fact that he fully justified his appointment as Governor of Africa and the Maghreb by his labours and ability is another matter.

* * *

It is not easy to assess the generalship of the commanders who led these expeditious into North Africa. We lack detailed knowledge of their plans and operations. The first two can be dismissed simply; they showed no generalship and were content to let others do the fighting for them.

Uqba bin Nafe was a fine battlefield commander and possessed a very high degree of tactical skill, but he showed scant regard for strategical principles. He led his army to its near-destruction in the High Atlas range, and it was only the eruption of inter-tribal warfare among the Berbers which saved it from annihilation. But perhaps he scoffed at strategy. He was a romantic, inspired by the higher ideals of holy war and martyrdom. His plunge into the Atlantic, mounted on his horse, was typical of the man.

Zuheir bin Qeis and Hassaan bin Noman were cast in the same mould. They were inspiring generals who went into battle with the sword in one hand and the Quran in the other. Not enough is known about their battles to judge them as army commanders, but the fact that they won their battles suggests that they were sound tactical commanders. And they won these battles not just against wild Berber hordes but against well-organised and sophisticated Roman armies as well, led by seasoned Roman generals.

Musa bin Nuseir was to become a towering figure of histroy, not so much for what he achieved in North Africa but because of

Spain. He was a man of drive and ambition and possessed organisational and administrative talent of a high order. In military operations he showed himself to be more of a strategist than a tactician, guiding the operations of his subordinates – and very soundly – rather than getting involved in them himself. But unlike Uqba, Zuheir and Hassaan, he was a worldly man, and his time saw more Berbers dragged into slavery and more towns pillaged than in earlier Muslim times. Because of his love of wealth and the harsh methods by which he acquired it, perhaps because of his avaricious masters in Fustat and Damascus, Musa never achieved the moral stature of his three predecessors. Ultimately he came to a bitter end, but that is outside the scope of this volume.

Beyond these brief judgements nothing can be said about the generalship of the Muslim commanders in North Africa. Since the final test of generalship is victory in battle, they were good generals. They passed the test. It must be kept in mind, however, that the plans and movements of some of them were deeply influenced by their desire to earn merit with Allah by fighting unbelievers, even to the exclusion of strategical wisdom. They were generals, but they were also holy warriors.

* * *

In entering the land of the Berbers, the Muslims clashed with the fiercest enemies they had met in their history or were likely to meet for a long time. The courage and toughness of the Berbers, their resilience in recovering from one bloody defeat to come back for more, their tenacity in resisting the Muslim advance generation after generation, faced the Muslims with the kind of opposition which even the brave Persians had not been able to muster. But the harder the Berbers fought, the more they suffered. They proved themselves a courageous and honourable nation and if ultimately they fell in war, others too had fallen before the relentless advance of Islam.

The fact that the Berbers were not one compact, centrally controlled nation but a disunited race of warring tribes, sharing a racial and cultural rather than a political and military community, worked in favour of the Muslims. Even within smaller geographical regions and districts the Berbers displayed a lack of unity typical of a tribal society. They were brave and skilfull as individual fighters

but lacked the organisation and generalship needed to take collective advantage of that courage and skill. On the two occasions when they did find unity and leadership under Kuseila and the High Priestess, they were able to turn the Muslims out of Africa. But these were merely the delaying actions of histroy. In the end the Berbers had to fall and submit to Islam, and with this submission rise again as a great warrior people.

It was a mark of the high military quality of the Muslim Arabs that they were able to wrest victory in battle against such ferocious enemies, numerically so much stronger and often guided by able Roman officers. They worsted the Berber in every battle, with the sole exception of their first clash with the High Priestess. What the Muslims went through in their marches and their battles is a glowing tribute to their courage, faith and military prowess. This is especially true of Uqba's campaign of the Maghreb and his operations in the High Atlas. No army has earned a higher place in the military Hall of Fame then Uqba's Army of the Maghreb.

* * *

The behaviour of a people or a society on the political and ethical plane has to be judged according to standards prevailing at the time. The best way for us to seek a standard of judgement for this period is to study the Eastern Roman Empire at Byzantium, or Constantinople, during the period of the conquests described in this book, i.e. from 640 AD (the start of the invasion of Egypt) to 707 (Musa's reconquest of the Maghreb). Byzantium is often extolled as a brilliant centre of culture and civilization, heir to both the Roman and the Greek traditions, which, we are told, was damaged by the rising power of Islam.

It is worth reminding ourselves how good Rome was. Its military quality was unquestionably high but we should know more about the political and ethical condition of the empire. and then, with that as a background, we will be in a better position to form an opinion about Muslim actions in North Africa. Moreover, the Romans have been with us through three books[1] and will not be with us in the future, as we enter Spain. They are almost like old friends, and it will be nice to see how they have been doing. The

1. The Sword of Allah, The Muslim Conquest of Persia and this volume.

brief summary that follows in the next few paragraphs is based exclusively on Gibbon's *Decline and fall of the Roman Empire.*

Heraclius was the Roman Emperor when Amr bin Al Aas invaded Egypt. He ruled for 31 years and is acknowledged as one of the great emperors of Rome. When his first wife died, leaving behind a son named Constantine, he contracted an incestuous marriage with his niece Martina, and the superstitious Greeks believed that the deformity of their son Heracleonas was due to the wrath of heaven.

Before his death in 641, in his last testimony, Heraclius declared both his sons as equal heirs to the throne and instructed them to honour his widow as mother and sovereign. But shortly after the death of Heraclius, his elder son, Constantine II, died, allegedly poisoned by Martina. As a result of this, Martina's tongue was amputated and her son, still a boy, was deprived of his nose.

The elder of the poisoned emperor's two sons mounted the throne at the age of 11 as Constans II and was to rule for 27 years. He was the one who was defeated at sea in the Battle of the Masts in 34 Hijri by Abdullah bin Sad, and it was in his time that the first and second invasions of Africa took place. He grew up to be a heartless tyrant. Fearing that the senate might appoint his brother Theodosius as co-emperor, he forced him to take holy orders and become a monk, which disqualified him from the throne.

Not satisfied with this, Constans later had his brother killed. This led to the multitudes coming out in the streets, clamouring for the Emperor's blood, and this drove the latter into permanent exile. He settled down in Sicily, where he was killed in his bath by an attendant hitting him on the head with a vase. This happened in 668. The people of Sicily placed the crown on the head of an obscure youth of indescribable beauty.

In Constantinople, the eldest of the dead emperor's three sons was placed on the throne as Constantine IV, and he at once set out to reconquer Sicily. The island was taken and the beauteous head

of its ill-fated young king was sent to Constantinople for display at the Hippodrome (sports stadium). Another noble youth, Germanus, who refused to kill his own virtuous father, was punished with castration.

Many years later, when there was an unsuccessful revolt against him, Constantine suspected his two brothers of having a hand in it and promptly had their noses cut off. And this man died a natural death in 685.

His son, Justinian II, was proclaimed Emperor. There was more vice, more luxury, more cruelty. Tax-payers who did not pay their taxes were suspended head down over a slow and smoky fire. An eunuch appointed as minister in charge of the palace had the Emperor's own mother whipped. For ten years the people groaned under an oppression which became progressively more unbearable. Then they rose.

The uprising was led by a general named Leontius. The Emperor was overthrown and sentenced to the loss of his nose, but the operation was not neatly done with the result that he still had a bit of his nose when he was exiled to the wilds of Tartary. He wandered among the Khazars and the Bulgars.

Meanwhile, after three years, the general was overthrown, and mutilated, by another rebel who assumed the name of Tiberius as he ascended the throne. And he lasted seven years before the exiled, half-nosed Justinian returned with an army of Bulgars to conquer Constantinople and reclaim the throne after a ten-year absence.

Under Justinian's orders the two usurpers who had ruled during his exile were dragged to the Hippodrome in chains and cast beneath the Emperor's throne. He planted one foot on the neck of each wretched ex-emperor and sat thus for more than an hour watching the chariot races. Later, after slow tortures, the tow rebels were killed. Justinian's cruelties became even more inhuman as he set about to punish those who had supported the two rebels or had insulted him during his exile.

It was two years after the return of Justinian II that Musa bin Nuseir reconquered the Maghreb. We now say farewell to Rome, while it is ruled by the beastly, mutilated Justinian. He had only another four years to live, until 711, when he was overthrown by an armed revolt and executed along with his son. Thus ended the dynasty of Heraclius after a reign of 101 years, to be followed by the Isaurian Dynasty.

* * *

This was the Rome from which the Copts and the Berbers were delivered by the invading armies of Islam. It is against this Byzantine background that we form a correct picture of the condition of the new Muslim order: the stability, the law and justice, the discipline, the peace and prosperity. The Muslim conquerors saved the Berbers and raised them to their own level as brothers-in-Islam. Now a Berber could be a governor and a general, like Tariq bin Ziyad at Tangier, which was unthinkable in the time of the imperial, and imperialistic, Romans.

The Muslims fought, killed and took plunder, but this was the custom of the time. All those taken in battle were captives and slaves, and this happened with all armies. If the Muslims shed more blood in North Africa than in other theatres, it was because their enemies fought more stubbornly and kept coming back for more. The Muslims themselves suffered as much when they lost to the Berbers. Those were cruel times in terms of physical violence, judged by our 20th Century Red Cross ethics.

However, it is to their credit that they did not kill or plunder outside battle. There was no question of Muslim soldiers wantonly killing people in towns and villages not at war with the Muslim power. And it is to their credit that they always offered terms before battle and scrupulously avoided harming communities which accepted the terms: acceptance of Islam or payment of the Jizya – a poll tax imposed upon non-Muslims, usually two dinars per head per annum. This was not done by armies before them, nor by armies which came after.

Prophet Muhammad, on whom be peace, had said: "There will always be a group of my followers in the Maghreb, fighting in the way of the Truth, till the Coming of the Hour."[1]

The prediction had to come true. The Muslims have always been there, in North Africa, fighting in the way of the Truth.

1. Marrakushi: p 6.

APPENDIX A: BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. Ibn Hisham: *Seerat-un-Nabavi,* Cairo, 1955.
2. Waqidi: *Maghazi Rasulillah,* Cairo, 1948. *Futuh-ush-Sham,* Cairo, 1954.
3. Ibn Sad: *Tabaqat-ul-Kubara,* Cairo, 1939.
4. Ibn Quteiba: *Al Ma'arif,* Cairo, 1960
5. Yaqubi: *Tareekh-ul-Yaqubi,* Beirut, 1960. *Al Buldan,* Lieden, 1892.
6. Balazuri: *Futuh-ul-Buldan,* Cairo, 1959.
7. Dinawari: *Akhbar-ul-Tiwal,* Cairo, 1960.
8. Tabari: *Tareekh-ul-Umam wal-Muluk,* Cairo, 1939.
9. Masudi: *Muruj-uz-Zahab,* Cairo, 1958. *Al Tanbeeh wal Ashraf,* Cairo, 1938.
10. Ibn Rusta: *A'laq-un-Nafeesa,* Lieden, 1892.
11. Abu Yusuf: *Kitab-ul-Kharaj,* Cairo, 1962.
12. Yaqut: *Mu'jam-ul-Buldan,* Tehran, 1965.
13. Abul Fida: *Taqweem-ul-Buldan,* Paris, 1840.
14. Ibn Abdul Hakam: *Futuh Misr,* Lieden, 1920.
15. Suyuti: *Husn-ul-Muhazara,* 1967.
16. Marrakushi: Ibn Izan: *Al Bayan al Maghreb,* 1948 Lieden Eidtion.
17. Bakri: *Al Musalik wal Mumalik,* 1857 Algiers Edition.
18. Ibn Khaldun: *Tareekh,* Beirut, 1967.
19. Gibbon: *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire,* London, 1954.
20. John, Bishop of Nikiu: *Chronicle,* Oxford, 1916.

APPENDIX B: THE HIJRI AND CHRISTIAN YEARS

Hijri Year	Christian Date	Hijri Year	Christian Date
1	16 Jul 622	34	22 Jul 654
2	5 Jul 623	35	11 Jul 655
3	*24 Jun 624	36	*30 Jun 656
4	13 Jun 625	37	19 Jun 657
5	2 Jun 626	38	9 Jun 658
6	23 May 627	39	29 May 659
7	*11 May 628	40	*17 May 660
8	1 May 629	41	7 May 661
9	20 Apr 630	42	26 Apr 662
10	9 Apr 631	43	15 Apr 663
11	*29 Mar 632	44	*4 Apr 664
12	18 Mar 633	45	24 Mar 665
13	7 Mar 634	46	13 Mar 666
14	25 Feb 635	47	3 Mar 667
15	*14 Feb 636	48	*20 Feb 668
16	2 Feb 637	49	9 Feb 669
17	23 Jan 638	50	29 Jan 670
18	12 Jan 639	51	18 Jan 671
19	*2 Jan 640	52	*8 Jan 672
20	*21 Dec 640	53	*27 Dec 672
21	10 Dec 641	54	16 Dec 673
22	30 Nov 642	55	6 Dec 674
23	19 Nov 643	56	25 Nov 675
24	*7 Nov 644	57	*14 Nov 676
25	28 Oct 645	58	3 Nov 677
26	17 Oct 646	59	23 Oct 678
27	7 Oct 647	60	13 Oct 679
28	*25 Sep 648	61	*1 Oct 680
29	14 Sep 649	62	20 Sep 681
30	4 Sep 650	63	10 Sep 682
31	24 Aug 651	64	30 Aug 683
32	*12 Aug 652	65	*18 Aug 684
33	2 Aug 653	66	8 Aug 685

*A leap Year

Hijri Year	Christian Date	Hijri Year	Christian Date
67	28 Jul 686	84	24 Jan 703
68	18 Jul 687	85	*14 Jan 704
69	*6 Jul 688	86	2 Jan 705
70	25 Jun 689	87	23 Dec 705
71	15 Jun 690	88	12 Dec 706
72	4 Jun 691	89	1 Dec 707
73	*23 May 692	90	*20 Nov 708
74	13 May 693	91	9 Nov 709
75	2 May 694	92	29 Oct 710
76	21 Apr 695	93	19 Oct 711
77	*10 Apr 696	94	*7 Oct 712
78	30 Mar 697	95	26 Sep 713
79	20 Mar 698	96	16 Sep 714
80	9 Mar 699	97	5 Sep 715
81	*26 Feb 700	98	*25 Aug 716
82	15 Feb 701	99	14 Aug 717
83	4 Feb 702		

*A leap Year

APPENDIX C : INDEX OF PLACES

A

Agadeer: 234.
Aghmat Wareeka: 240.
Ajnadein: 7, 16, 67.
Aleppo: 67.
Alexandria: 3, 4, 5, 8, 14, 17, 18, 20, 21, 22, 23, 25, 51, 60, 61, 65, 66, 69, 70, 71, 73, 74, 76, 77, 78, 79, 80, 81, 82, 83, 84, 87, 88, 89, 90, 91, 92, 93, 94, 95, 97, 98, 110, 126, 127, 128, 130, 135, 136, 137, 139, 146, 151, 178, 179, 181, 213, 249.
Algiers: 146.
Antioch: 31, 67.
Aqaba: 14.
Aquada: 199.
Amawas: 105.
Areesh: 13, 14, 15, 17, 54.
Asqalan: 183.
Aswan: 14, 15, 101, 111.
Atbara: 101.
Aures Mtns: 221, 266, 269, 272, 274, 276.

B

Babylon: 19, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27, 30, 33, 34, 38, 39, 40, 43, 49, 51, 53, 54, 56, 57, 59, 63, 65, 69, 70, 71, 73, 74, 79, 92, 95, 99, 104, 128, 129, 213.
Badr: 43, 187.
Baghaya: 221, 222, 225, 270.
Baja: 263.
Bajaya: 145, 146.
Balheeb: 74, 89.
Bardia: 151.
Barqa: 14, 15, 110, 113, 116, 145, 146, 151, 195, 198, 218, 248, 253, 256, 257, 272, 273, 282.
Basra: 93, 182, 281, 292.
Beisan: 16.
Benghazi: 14, 113, 152.
Bilbeis: 19, 26, 68.
Biskra: 241, 243.
Bizerta: 201, 263.
Bone (Buna): 228, 263.

C

Carthage: 147, 148, 149, 153, 167, 195, 197, 200, 201, 204, 212, 221, 222, 225, 255, 256, 259, 261, 262, 263, 264, 266, 276, 282, 288.
Constantinople: 82, 89, 92, 127, 148, 149, 153, 196, 199, 201, 226, 261, 264, 294, 296.
Crete: 217, 249.
Ctesiphon: 10.

D

Damanhur: 73.
Damascus: 7, 67, 94, 175, 185, 186, 190, 195, 197, 201, 204, 214, 251, 258, 260, 264, 272, 278, 281, 283, 284, 288, 290, 293.
Dar'a: 240.
Darna: 256, 257, 259, 282.
Damietta: 22, 110.
Dumqula: 111, 174, 175.

E

Eegheer: 240.
Eila: 14, 15.
Ein Shams (See Heliopolis).
Ein-ut-Tamr: 280.
Emessa: 16, 67.
Ephesus: 60.

F

Fahl: 67.
Faiz: 155.
Farma: 17, 18, 19, 25, 26, 54, 56.
Fayyum: 58, 121.
Fez: 228.
Fezzan: 113, 206, 207, 209.
Funduq-ul-Uqbi: 254.
Fustat: 50, 95, 98, 106, 108, 110, 113, 119, 121, 128, 129, 130, 145, 149, 151, 170, 181, 183, 190, 194, 216, 276, 277, 278, 281, 283, 293.

G

Gabes: 271, 274.
Gafsa (Qafsa): 167, 209, 210, 247.
Ghudamis: 209.
Giza: 23, 24, 70, 71, 76, 98, 99, 151.

H

Heliopolis (Ein Shams): 19, 23, 24, 33, 34, 35, 56, 58, 104, 108, 110.
Hulwa: 79, 82.

I

Ikhna: 126, 128, 136.

J

Jabia: 9.
Jalaula: 200.
Jamm: 269.
Jarma: 206, 207.
Jerusalem: 1, 10, 67.

K

Kadesh: 58.
Karbala: 215.
Kaum Shareek: 72, 73, 186.
Khartoum: 101, 111.
Khawar: 208, 209.
Kheibar: 91.
Kheis: 74, 89.
Khenchela: 221.
Kiryaun: 73, 74, 75, 76, 89.
Kufa: 93, 182, 186, 190.

M

Madina: 5, 6, 7, 31, 32, 43, 87, 89, 90, 91, 105, 106, 107, 108, 116, 118, 120, 128, 143, 144, 145, 149, 150, 161, 169, 170, 171, 173, 182, 183, 187, 189, 194.
Majjana: 209.
Majorca: 286.
Malwiya (Melilla): 255.
Maqs: 78, 79, 80.
Marakash: 229, 240.
Marj-ur-Rum: 16.
Marwalbeel: 254.
Maryut Lake: 78, 79, 80.
Maseela: 224.
Massa: 240.
Mecca: 1, 5, 6, 17, 43, 87, 89, 90, 108, 122, 123, 124, 161, 169, 173, 187, 189, 190, 194, 251, 260, 289.
Meknes: 228.
Memphis: 16, 17, 19, 22, 23, 26, 54, 58, 68, 77, 101, 102, 104, 108, 145.

Mersa Matruh: 151.
Minorca: 286.
Miskiana: 270, 271, 272, 274.
Monasteer: 221, 222, 225.
Muqattam: 99, 100, 134, 194.

N

Nafta: 209.
Naqyus: 130, 135, 138.
Nicaea: 60.
Niffees: 240.
Nihawand: 10.

O

Oran: 215.

P

Pelusium: 17.
Pentapolis: 113, 151.
Pharos: 78.

Q

Qadisiyya: 10.
Qasr Fars: 79.
Qasteelia: 209.
Qeirowan: 167, 212, 213, 214, 216, 220, 222, 223, 224, 241, 247, 248, 250, 251, 252, 253, 254, 255, 256, 258, 259, 260, 261, 264, 266, 269, 276, 282, 283, 284, 285.
Qinassareen: 16.
Qulzum (Suez): 106, 108.
Qunia: 199, 200.

R

Rafah: 12, 13.
Rakotis: 77, 78.
Ramlah: 77, 78.
Rauda: 23, 24, 39, 48, 51, 65, 151.
Rhodes: 249.
Rosetta (Rasheed): 22.

S

Sabta (Ceuta): 228, 285.
Sabrata: 115.
Sajuma: 282.
Sakha: 74, 89.
Saqqara: 23.
Sardinia: 286.
Satfura: 263.
Shabshir Tamalai: 130.
Shajratein: 13.
Shakir: 240.
Sicily: 201, 202, 262, 264, 266, 286, 295.
Sidi Barani: 151.
Siffin: 185.
Sirte (Surt): 152, 206, 209.
Sousa: 199, 200, 209, 210, 212, 222, 251, 269.
Subetula: 152, 153, 154, 155, 156, 166, 167, 182, 195, 198, 199, 236, 251, 259.
Sulteis: 73, 74, 75.

T

Tahuza: 243, 246, 247, 250, 283.
Tangier: 146, 148, 149, 226, 227, 228, 229, 241, 273, 285.
Tarna: 240.
Tarnut (Tarrana): 71, 76.
Tarudant: 234, 240, 241.
Tauzar: 209.
Teehart: 224, 225.
Tilimsan: 215, 237.
Tinnees: 22, 23, 110.
Tobruk: 151.

Tripoli: 110, 113, 114, 115, 116, 148, 149, 151, 152, 153, 154, 209, 253, 273.
Tubna: 241.
Tunis: 212, 286.

U

Uhud: 6, 201.
Uman: 260.
Uqba: 146.

W

Wadi-ul-Azara: 271.
Waleeli: 228.
Warzazate: 240.

Y

Yaqusa: 16.
Yarmuk: 7, 9, 16, 30, 67.

Z

Zab: 224.
Zaghwan: 282.
Zama: 147.
Zaweela: 113, 209.

APPENDIX D : INDEX OF PERSONS

A

Abdul Aziz bin Marwan: 277, 278, 280, 281, 282, 283, 284.
Abdullah bin Amr: 5, 6, 54, 73, 75, 96, 121, 122, 144, 185, 192, 193, 194, 195, 198, 202.
Abdullah bin Huzafa: 95.
Abdullah bin Marwan: 284.
Abdullah bin Musa: 282, 286.
Abdullah bin Qeis: 176, 201.
Abdullah bin Sad bin Abi Sarh. 121, 122, 123, 124, 125, 127, 128, 138, 139, 143, 144, 145, 147, 154, 155, 157, 159, 160, 162, 163, 167, 168, 169, 170, 171, 172, 174, 175, 177, 178, 179, 182, 183, 196, 202, 203, 210, 236, 259, 291, 295.
Abdullah bin Umar: 96, 144, 173, 198.
Abdullah bin Zubeir: 144, 160, 161, 162, 163, 164, 165, 166, 167, 168, 169, 170, 172, 198, 199, 200, 251, 260, 289.
Abdul Malik bin Marwan: 198, 200, 251, 252, 253, 258, 260, 265, 272, 273, 277, 281, 284, 289.
Abdur Rahman bin Abi Bakr: 144, 202.
Abdur Rahman bin Muljam: 190.
Abraham, Prophet: 17, 57, 122.
Abu Ayub Ansari: 89, 96.
Abu Bakr, Caliph: 7, 10, 67, 124, 161, 163, 172, 182, 280.
Abu Muhajir Dinar: 213, 214, 215, 216, 220, 237, 238, 239, 242, 244, 245.
Abu Maryam: 90.
Abu Muslim: 96.
Abu Ubeida: 9, 67, 105.
Abu Zar: 89, 96.
Adam: 102.
Alexander: 22, 77.
Ali, Caliph: 122, 173, 183, 184, 185, 186, 190, 191, 192, 197, 203.
Amr bin Al Ass: 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 17, 19, 24, 26, 27, 28, 29, 30, 31, 32, 33, 34, 35, 36, 37, 38, 40, 41, 42, 43, 44, 48, 49, 51, 52, 53, 54, 55, 61, 64, 68, 69, 70, 72, 73, 75, 79, 80, 81, 82, 83, 84, 85, 86, 87, 88, 90, 91, 94, 95, 96, 97, 98, 99, 100, 103, 104, 105, 106, 107, 108, 109, 110, 111, 112, 113, 114, 115, 116, 117, 118, 119, 120, 121, 124, 126, 127, 128, 129, 131, 133, 134, 135, 136, 137, 138, 139, 143, 151, 171, 174, 176, 184, 185, 186, 187, 188, 189, 190, 191, 192, 193, 194, 195, 197, 205, 206, 213.
Amr bin Bakr: 190.
Amr bin Umayya: 188.
Arfakhshad: 15.
Arius: 60.
Asma bint Abi Bakr: 161.
Augustus Theodorus: 25, 39, 48, 49, 51, 74.
Ayesha: 184.

B

Bashr bin Marwan: 281.
Belisarius: 148.
Benjamin: 18.
Boniface: 148.
Busr bin Abi Artah: 179.

C

Cleopatra: 78.
Constans II: 86, 127, 149, 179, 180, 196, 295.
Constantine I: 60.
Constantine II: 149, 295.
Constantine IV: 295, 296.
Cyril: 60.
Cyrus (Jureij): 20, 89.

D

Daluka: 59.
David, Prophet: 217.

F

Fariq: 145.

G

Gaesaric: 148.
Germanus: 296.
Gregory: 149, 151, 153, 154, 155, 157, 158, 159, 160, 161, 162, 163, 165, 166, 167, 168, 170, 195, 196, 236, 259.
Goliath: 217, 218.

H

Hager (Hajira): 57.
Hajjaj bin Abdullah: 190.
Hajjaj bin Yusuf: 161, 260, 281, 292.
Ham: 15.
Hamza: 201.
Hannibal: 147.
Hansh bin Abdullah: 247.
Haris bin Al Hakam: 145.
Hassaan bin Noman: 260, 261, 262, 263, 264, 265, 266, 267, 269, 270, 271, 272, 273, 274, 275, 276, 277, 278, 280, 282, 290, 291, 292, 293.
Hassan bin Ali: 191, 195, 290.
Hatîb bin Balta'a: 20, 21, 22.
Haumal: 133, 134.
Heracleonas: 149, 295.
Heraclius: 20, 54, 61, 62, 63, 64, 66, 67, 68, 70, 82, 83, 127, 149, 196, 295, 297.
Herod: 59.
Herodotus: 101.
High Priestess (Kahina): 267, 268, 269, 270, 271, 272, 273, 274, 275, 276, 294.
Hind: 201.
Hubahiba: 196, 197, 198, 259.
Hussein bin Ali: 215.

I

Ibn Bassama: 136.
Iqbal: 235.
Ismail: 17.

J

Jacob, Prophet: 58.
Jesus, Prophet: 21, 47, 59, 60, 61, 218.
John: 264, 265, 266.
Joseph, Prophet: 23, 56, 58.
Julian: 226, 227, 241, 284, 285, 287.
Julius Caesar: 78.
Junada bin Abi Umayya: 249.
Justinian I: 148.
Justinian II: 296, 297.

K

Kahina (see High Priestess).
Khalid bin Al Waleed: 6, 7, 9, 17, 30, 67, 122, 189, 205, 280.

Khalid bin Yazeed: 271, 274, 275.
Kharija bin Huzafa: 32, 35, 36, 37, 38, 97, 129, 190, 191.
Kuseila bin Lamzam: 215, 235, 236, 237, 238, 239, 241, 242, 243, 244, 247, 248, 250, 251, 253, 254, 255, 256, 259, 261, 269, 277, 294.

L

Leontius: 296.

M

Ma'bad bin Abbas: 144, 170.
Mandfur (Abnoxious Snake): 25, 26, 39, 48, 74.
Manuel: 127, 128, 131, 132, 136.
Maqauqas: 20, 21, 22, 25, 26, 38, 39, 40, 41, 42, 44, 46, 47, 49, 53, 54, 61, 62, 63, 64, 68, 70, 76, 86, 87, 89. 91, 99, 100, 110, 126.
Maria: 22, 57.
Mark Anthony: 77.
Marnaq: 262, 263.
Martina: 68, 149, 295.
Marwan bin Al Hakam: 145, 171, 172, 182, 183, 198, 251.
Marwan bin Musa: 282.
Mary: 60.
Maslama bin Mukhallad: 32, 83, 84, 85, 86, 87, 213, 216.
Miqdad bin Al Aswad: 32.
Misr bin Baesar: 15, 100, 145.
Moses, Prophet: 21, 23, 58, 189.
Muawia bin Abi Sufyan: 10, 94, 139, 175, 176, 177, 178, 184, 185, 186, 187, 190, 191, 194, 195, 197, 201, 202, 203, 204, 215, 249, 280, 281, 290, 291.
Muawia bin Hudeij: 174, 197, 198, 199, 201, 202, 203, 210, 211, 213, 249, 291.
Muhammad, Prophet: 5, 6, 7, 1 18, 20, 21, 22, 30, 43, 46, 56 65, 67, 87, 89, 122, 123, 124, 144, 150, 157, 161, 163, 171, 172, 184, 187, 188, 189, 191, 192, 193, 198, 204, 205, 246, 272, 289, 298.
Muhammad bin Abi Bakr: 182, 186, 197, 202.
Muhammad bin Maslama: 118, 119.
Muqattam: 100.
Musa bin Nuseir: 279, 280, 281, 282, 283, 284, 285, 286, 287, 292, 294, 297.

N

Najjashi (Negus). 6, 20, 187, 188, 189.
Nestorius: 60.
Nicephorus (Najfur): 199, 201.
Nuseir: 280.
Noah, Prophet: 15, 100.

O

Octavian: 77.

P

Parwez: 20.
Potiphar: 58.

Q

Qait Bey: 78.

R

Ramses: 58.

S

Sabiyya: 159.

Sad bin Abi Waqqas: 10, 93.
Safiyya: 30.
Sam: 15.
Sarah: 57.
Shareek bin Sumayy: 72, 97, 130, 131, 132, 134.
Shurahbeel bin Hasana: 9.
Shurahbeel bin Huyayya: 50, 51, 52. 53.

T

Talha bin Ubeidullah: 184.
Talma: 127, 128, 136, 137.
Tariq bin Ziyad: 284, 285, 287, 297.
Tiberius: 296.
Thutmose III: 78.
Trajan: 23, 108.

U

Ubada bin As-Samit: 32, 42, 43, 44, 45, 46, 48, 87, 88, 96.
Ubeidullah bin Umar: 144.
Umar, Caliph: 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 31, 32, 35, 67, 69, 86, 90, 93, 94, 96, 98, 104, 105, 106, 107, 108, 115, 116, 117, 118, 119, 120, 121, 127, 171, 172, 173, 175, 176, 185, 194, 203, 279, 289.
Umar bin Ali: 224, 246.
Uqba bin Amr: 12.
Uqba bin Nafe: 111, 112, 113, 195, 198, 203, 204, 205, 206, 207, 208, 209, 210, 211, 212, 213, 214, 215, 216, 219, 220, 221, 222, 223, 224, 225, 226, 227, 228, 229, 230, 231, 232, 233, 234, 235, 236, 237, 238, 239, 240, 241, 242, 243, 244, 245, 246, 247, 250, 251, 252, 258, 269, 282, 284, 285, 290, 291, 292, 293, 294.
Useifa bin Wa'la: 18.
Usman, Caliph: 11, 12, 121, 123, 124, 125, 128, 135, 139, 144, 145, 149, 169, 171, 172, 173, 176, 182, 183, 184, 185, 202, 203, 291.

W

Waleed bin Abdul Malik: 279, 284.
Werdan: 54, 73, 75, 138.
William: 196, 197, 198, 199, 201.

Y

Yafis: 15.
Yazeed bin Abi Sufyan: 9, 249.
Yazeed bin Muawia: 215.

Z

Zubeir bin Al Awwam: 30, 31, 32, 33, 34, 49, 50, 51, 52, 53, 54, 91, 96, 161, 184.
Zuheir bin Qeis: 224, 246, 247, 248, 252, 253, 254, 255, 256, 257, 258, 259, 290, 291, 292, 293.
Zuleikha: 23, 58.
Zulqarnein: 235.